

**‘Ivory Lives’**

**Race, Ethnicity and the Practice of Whiteness**

**Amongst Young People**

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*High in the tower, where I sit above the loud complaining of the human sea, I know many souls that toss and whirl and pass, but none there are that intrigue me more than the Souls of White Folk.*

W.E.B. Du Bois (1920)

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## Abstract

*A cursory review of the extant literature on race, ethnicity and youth culture reveals a burgeoning amount of social science research that investigates the ethnic identities of minority groups. Yet to date, we still know very little about the corresponding cultural identities of the ethnic majority and who they are in these times of global change and economic disharmony. This thesis aims to address this imbalance by exploring the meaning of white ethnicity in young people's lives. It draws upon historical, subcultural and ethnographic methods of data collection to ask the question, how do white youth 'do' whiteness in the present English post-imperial moment. By making lucid the 'practice' of whiteness, the thesis illustrates the varied and contingent enactment of white identities by young people. It is argued that a new appraisal of white, Anglo-ethnicities is presently required if young people are to be sufficiently equipped for dealing with the 'new times' of contemporary multi-ethnic Britain. The thesis implodes the monolithic assumption of whiteness as a hermetically sealed ethnic category to investigate the complex, multiple and fragmented experiences entailed when exhibiting white cultural identities. Moreover, the evidence suggests that a failure to connect with white ethnicities may only serve to bolster youthful allegiances to a xenophobic white, English nationalism. Instead, the research calls for a critical engagement with white, English ethnicities in order to splice the social immediacy of whiteness, racism and nationalism in young people's lives. In this respect the study aims to explore the possibilities available for a positive white, youthful identity unencumbered by the burden of racism and nationalism. As such, the thesis explores the 'making' and 'unmaking' of whiteness and considers the possibilities for new white ethnicities in the West Midlands and Tyneside conurbation of England.*



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**PART I**

**‘ENGAGING WITH WHITENESS’**

**TOWARDS A NEW CRITICAL METHODOLOGY**

## **Introduction**

## **Introduction: Key concepts and questions**

There is a quality and transparency to whiteness as if being white means lacking a racial identity ... What happens to our understanding of race when the dreaded ethnographic gaze is turned back upon itself, away from the (presumably) nonwhite Other to the (presumably) white subject? The consequences might be far more disturbing and ambiguous than one expects. (Stowe, 1996:70).

As David Stowe implies, to interrogate whiteness by way of ethnographic enquiry may yet lead to a radical disturbance in the matrix of 'race relations'. For until most recently research in the area of race and ethnicity has focused exclusively on the cultural identities of ethnic minorities. This preoccupation with a mainly dark and distant Other has left the question of whiteness and white identity seemingly beyond reproach. If the 'dreaded ethnographic gaze' is self-reflexively turned upon white individuals - and if such a move should upturn colonial perceptions of 'dark', Irish or Jewish Others as inferior - then this thesis will have gone some way to succeeding in its task. In short, the aim is to examine whiteness in such a way as to bring about a reconfiguration in our understanding of race and ethnicity as the endless project about the Other. The impetus behind this research grew from my experience as a researcher and youth worker working alongside young people. It seemed to me that a minority of self-identified white racist youth had seemingly colonised the meaning of white ethnicity as it was popularly understood through the style of Skinheadism. The symbolic effect of this discursive take-over was felt by a number of youth from diverse cultural backgrounds. Was it at all possible we wondered, for there to be a positive white identity for young people in the contemporary English situation and more specifically within particular regions? Moreover, if such an identity could be conceived of, what exactly would it look like and how would this impact upon our future understandings of whiteness? In this sense, the thesis seeks to shed light on the issue of how white youth come to enact whiteness.



Although the concept of race has long been espoused as a social construct<sup>1</sup> racialised discourses still continue to pervade many of our everyday thoughts, language and daily practices. Indeed, in contemporary Western society the term race has itself come to be seen as something to do with ethnic minority peoples, as if white people do not inhabit racially inscribed lives. In this sense, a curious silence has come to mark the discussion of whiteness. Indeed, terms such as ethnic identity, ethnicity and even on occasion race have tended to be applied to minority groups at the expense of overlooking the subjectivities of the white Anglo-majority. Instead, the term *race* is understood here as a discursive category that is only ever given meaning through language, symbols and a set of social signifiers made culturally available in the wider field of representation<sup>2</sup>. As such, the search for fixed biological differences between peoples has failed to produce evidence of any essential characteristics that can immutably be used to define (and so compartmentalise) human beings into discrete biological species or 'races'. In this way, the thesis is concerned with what we may consider to be the 'fiction of race'. It asks how this narrative can be sustained and made communicable through intra-discursive practices.

However, this does not mean that social difference and diversification do not exist within contemporary Western post-colonial societies. Rather, the term *ethnicity* has been used to understand the multitude of cultural differences and beliefs related to religious customs, food consumption, music, dress, dance, leisure rituals, kinship patterns and so forth. In this respect, ethnicity is seen as a fluid, on-going process that is continually being adopted and adapted by successive generations. As such, (lest it be forgotten) ethnicity is as much about *social change* as continuity, flux as opposed to permanence. For these reasons, the anti-essentialist usage of ethnicity - signified as a cultural practice rather than a 'core' identity - has been my preferred term of expression over race. But we would be mistaken in believing that ethnicity can not in

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<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, many writers prefer to use parenthesis when referring to the term, hence 'race'. However, the frequency with which this is done has tended to make the practice meaningless. For the purposes of this study the highly problematic nature of the construct is all too evident and does not require any further emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Banton (1992[1987]) has examined the multiple usage of the term race and its various connections to lineage, type, subspecies, status and class.

and of itself become a racialised motif<sup>3</sup>. In the light of this it should be said that any discussion of the nomenclature of race and ethnicity must not detract from an understanding of racism and the asymmetrical relations of power that negatively impinge upon ethnic minority communities often to the benefit of their ethnic majority counterparts. At the same time, my disposition towards a more inclusive and flexible understanding of ethnicity - and in particular how this affects white Englishness - should not leave us to be complacent about the existence of contemporary colour-based racisms<sup>4</sup>. Rather, the focus on ethnicity as a mutable cultural practice instead of the mythologies of race is an attempt to locate and critically evaluate the ever-escaping identities of the white Anglo-majority. Elsewhere, I make use of the term *racialisation* to capture the process by which individuals and communities are interpreted through the imagined concept of race. Thus, while ethnic minority communities tend to be racialised through strikingly different tropes (the sexually threatening African-Caribbean, the 'inscrutable' Asian, the drunk Paddy etc.) they are all nevertheless subject to the process of racial ascription in a way that the dominant white, English majority rarely are. Subsequently, the application of fictitious racial essences to the places, bodies and everyday practices of minority groups has jointly served to racially encrypt these communities whilst de-racialising the white Anglo-ethnic majority.

The thesis is informed by a diverse and interdisciplinary literature on white ethnicity (Chapter 2), youth subculture (Chapter 4) and working-class history (Chapter 1, Chapter 6). As such, it is especially concerned with investigating the little known ethnicities of white youth to disclose the *meaning* of whiteness in young people's lives. The focus, then, is on how youthful white ethnicities come into being. This represents a major departure from existing research upon youth in which the cultural identities of the ethnic majority have so rarely been discussed (Back, 1993). In view of this lacuna in the debate the thesis sets out to achieve an empirical understanding of whiteness and white identity within the peer-group cultures of young people in English contexts. How young people come to self-identify as 'white' (or not) and their

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<sup>3</sup> Here, we may consider the forms of cultural racism that have arisen against Irish-Catholics, British Muslims and Orthodox Jews. Contemporary terms such as 'ethnic cleansing' or 'ethnic Albanians' further serve to demonstrate this point.

personal interpretations of whiteness and ethnicity remains a primary feature. The study grows out of longitudinal research projects conducted within schools and youth clubs in the North Eastern and Midlands districts of Britain. Through the use of historical and ethnographic methods incorporating interviews, photographs, participant observation, life-history method and a broad range of qualitative research techniques discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, a more sensitive interpretation of the complexity of whiteness in young people's lives has been undertaken. Here, priority has been given to the 'lived' experience of whiteness and the day to day social realities embodied in white skin privilege.

In the course of the investigation a critical question emerged: *how do white youth 'do' whiteness?* The significance of this question becomes paramount as the landscape for cultivating white, English identities outside the discourses of racism and nationhood appears to be an increasingly uncertain terrain. At the dawn of a new millennium the issue of whiteness in England remains central as to date we know little about the racial identities of the ethnic majority and who they are in the present post-imperial moment<sup>5</sup>. To understand the 'doing' of whiteness in young people's lives I have provided a series of case studies or repertoires of ethnic experience, with which to illustrate the various ways in which white identity can be enacted. Thus, a cohort of Skinhead youth in the outer districts of the West Midlands were found to use the symbols of English nationalism to fashion a white identity that was altogether different from that of their peers and the other young people discussed in the later Tyneside ethnography. As such, the 'doing' of whiteness was not accorded to skin tone or pigmentation but rather was strategically negotiated in peer group, familial and local environments.

Although the study of white ethnicity has only recently begun to take root it remains to be seen whether this will develop into a blossoming area for social science

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<sup>4</sup> Complex definitions of racism are discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>5</sup> The renewed publicity surrounding the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence in Eltham, London 1993 by a group of racist white youth is a timely (if belated) pointer to the urgency of investigating whiteness in contemporary Britain. This has most recently been signalled in the publication of the Macpherson Report (1999).

investigation, or wither and fade with the turn of a new season of academic trends and fashions. Recent years have witnessed a surge of interest in the subject of whiteness that has begun to dislodge the hitherto stable and unquestioned social category, 'white' (see Chapter 2). While some of these early forays into the study of whiteness are gradually altering dominant conceptions of ethnicity as the prerogative of minority groups, much of this work has been culturally specific to the wretched histories of racism and slavery in the United States. As the scholar Edward Said (1993:xxv) explains, 'England of course is an imperial class by itself, bigger, grander, more imposing than any other'. Thus, the rise and fall of the British Empire, the nation's long-relinquished status at the forefront of industrialisation, and the country's central role in two World Wars serve to act as a cursory reminder of the unique and sometimes turbulent history of the British Isles. Furthermore, the arrival - and later settlement - of peoples from the former colonies underlines the changing status of Britishness while posing new questions about whiteness and nationhood. As we shall go on to see, the settlement of black communities in Britain's urban centres has leant itself to changing formations of whiteness amongst the population that have equally drawn inspiration from black cultural style while maintaining a defensive hostility to all things 'foreign'. These cultural dialogues have frequently taken place against a backdrop of economic uncertainty, close inner-city living and white hostility. It is within this context of post-imperial 'faded glories' that this research has been undertaken.

The thesis, then, ploughs an alternative furrow through contemporary postcolonial thinking in the field of racism and ethnicity. It aims to move beyond the American obsession with a black/white racial dualism to encompass the emergent ethnic cultural differences that have already started to flower in the British context (Chapter 8). This perspective detracts from the consistent 'hyper-racialisation' of Asian and African-Caribbean communities within social science research to attend instead to the 'racelessness' of white ethnic groups. Ironically, while visible minorities appear to be little more than the sum of their collective racialised parts, the white ethnic majority continue to parade their identities as if they were void of racial meaning altogether. In this reversal of the traditional academic gaze dominant forms of white Anglo-ethnicity

are emphatically brought into focus and then meticulously interrogated (Chapter 5, 7). A central purpose of the work is then to focus on the ascendant categories of ethnicity (Hall, 1992; McIntosh, 1997). A second feature of this thesis is to develop an analysis that probes inter-ethnic cultural relations to also look more deeply at the *intra*-ethnic dynamics that exist between white youth themselves. At present we know very little about ethnic differences amongst white youth<sup>6</sup> and the meaning of whiteness in their lives. Subsequently, close attention is paid to the interconnectedness of these social identities with issues of gender, locality, generation, and most evidently, social class (see for example Chapter 7). In this sense, the research pays heed to the myriad and diverse ethnic practices that rest within the category 'white'.

A third and pivotal strand of the thesis is to consider the possibility for new forms of white subjectivity. As much of this research has been conducted in schools and youth clubs I feel it is important to reflect upon anti-racist strategies and pedagogic practice in the field. Indeed, it seems to me that new ethnicities may be forming less as a consequence of progressive anti-racist pedagogy and more as an effect of globalization and the new social reality of the contemporary, multi-ethnic, British urban experience. In this sense, the work seeks to go beyond the popular, Southern-based discourses of British anti-racism in the 1980s which paid scant attention to regional variations and the social geography of racism, anti-racism and ethnic minority population dispersal (Chapter 6, 7). By tracing the multiple and fragmented experience of white youth the thesis examines how white, English ethnicities are currently being negotiated in postcolonial Britain<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, I develop an argument for the necessary inclusion of the Anglo-ethnic majority within a new, critical pedagogy of teaching and learning. This approach departs from the black/white binary relation apparent in previous anti-racist policy and practice in which 'simple' conceptions of power were used to denounce black and white youth as the respective 'victims' and 'perpetrators' of racist harassment. The inadequacy of

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<sup>6</sup> However, this is not a study of 'white migrant' groups such as Jews, Irish or Italians. While I shall refer to white minority groups throughout the research the focus rests predominantly with the dominant Anglo-ethnic majority who have so far escaped much serious analysis.

<sup>7</sup> However, we must be alert to Britain's longstanding imperial relationship to Ireland, the Falkland Islands and, until most recently, Hong Kong. It would appear that there are still a few pink spaces left on the map of Empire.

this position was to see white and black youth portrayed in seemingly monolithic ways as homogenous cultural groupings divided across a colour line. In contrast, this study highlights contingent forms of identity and uncovers the interconnectedness of cultural identities. In particular, the research illuminates the multiple and fragmented forms of white cultural identity that exist within the social worlds of young people. It is now the task for contemporary critical pedagogy to engage with the intricate, incomplete and emergent forms of subjectivity that are illustrated here.

## **Thesis Structure**

In this Introduction I have drawn attention to the lack of youth studies on whiteness and signalled how this paucity contrasts with the abundance of work completed on ethnic minority groups. A case has been put forward for a sustained engagement with the meaning of whiteness in young peoples' social lives. In so doing I have called for the need to move beyond the hegemony of US race relations in order to address white Anglo-ethnicities in the British post-industrial city. It is envisaged that such a study will further implode the black/white dualism prevalent in much contemporary race relations debate that have tended to subsume or ignore internal differences within the categories 'black' and 'white'. In particular, intra-ethnic differences, religious affiliations, 'mixed-heritage' biographies and a spectrum of social influences related to gender, place and class for example, have tended to be over-simplified. Through the use of historical and ethnographic methods the thesis aims to provide a long-overdue analysis of white, English ethnicity.

Part I is concerned to engage with the ascendant category of ethnicity to demonstrate how an acknowledgement of whiteness can develop a better understanding of ethnicity and cultural identity. Moreover, the section considers how an engagement with white ethnicity may yet lead to more sophisticated theoretical research paradigms in the future. The section shows how a critical understanding of whiteness can be used to reconceptualise existing historical, ethnographic and subcultural research paradigms. In particular, the section demonstrates how the study of whiteness can be productively applied to existing historical material to generate further interpretations

of ethnicity, place and class. It then goes on to examine the contemporary literature on whiteness that has emerged in the US before considering the methodological impact of whiteness upon ethnographic studies of young people.

In the first chapter I will focus upon the specificity of the British experience of whiteness and trace its social meaning and cultural expansion throughout the industrial period. Through the use of historical methods I will attempt to disclose how the industrial labouring poor were effectively removed from whiteness. In particular, I will demonstrate how whiteness has come to carry contingent meaning in Britain and illustrate how white identity has been fractured across lines of place, ethnicity, gender and generation. The historiography of whiteness places the later empirical research firmly in a British context. Moreover, the inclusion of a social history of whiteness is a belated attempt to shed new light upon the ‘making’ of whiteness in post-industrial Britain. Chapter 2 introduces frameworks for whiteness and will proceed to engage with the growing collection of literature that has arisen in the area of whiteness and white identity, the majority of which has had a US slant. The literature reviewed in this chapter comprises a paradigmatic approach to whiteness. It aims to expose the multiple strands of argument and different debates on whiteness with a particular emphasis on the epistemological impetus behind the existing research. As such, my own study throws up new trajectories for future research by focusing on the British context and young people’s experience therein. Moreover, by employing historical and ethnographic methods it is hoped that a multi-layered analysis of whiteness can be achieved.

In Chapter 3 I will consider the methodological issues that arose in connection with conducting ethnographic research on the cultural identities of young people in Britain. Here, I will examine the micro-politics of research with particular attention being paid to the negotiation of ethnicity in fieldwork encounters. Furthermore, I will engage with a number of debates related to the significance of epistemological frameworks of research; the collection and organisation of data; the methods used to interpret and corroborate research findings. The section focuses on the politics of research and

concerns itself with a number of substantive issues that arose in the course of ethnography. In this sense I have resisted portraying a seamless narrative of research that plots the upward trajectory of the thesis from its inception to its culmination. Instead, I have attempted to deliver a self-reflexive account of living the ethnographic life. Alongside the theoretical issues that emerged in the doing of research I have attempted to capture something of the ‘messy’ nature of ethnography. Thus, the methodological narratives that are relayed are themselves partial, open-ended versions of how research is carried out.

In Chapter 4 I begin by documenting the influence of British post-war studies of youth and consider the development of subcultural theories. Here, I acknowledge the generative impact of this work on my thinking and show how cultural studies approaches to youth have also shaped this study. Indeed, the study of subculture can be likened to an aperture in which a rare glimpse of young people’s white ethnicities is fleetingly achieved. Not least for these reasons subcultural theory, with all its attendant methodological problems, was to become a meaningful technique for structuring the accounts of young people. The chapter discusses the epistemological approaches deployed to the study of young people and highlights the variety of procedures used in subcultural analysis including historical, textual and ethnographic methods. Moreover, the chapter reviews a number of subcultural studies and points to the failure of earlier research to locate the experience of white youth within any understanding of ethnicity. The chapter provides a suitable context for the subcultural analysis conducted throughout, most particularly in Chapters 5, 8 and 9.

Having established the need to engage with whiteness in Part I, the second section considers what we may adequately describe as the ‘doing’ of whiteness. Here in Part II the focus is how white youth ‘do’ whiteness in the present English post-imperial moment. In particular, the chapters elaborate upon historical and ethnographic methods to focus upon the meaning of white identity amongst contemporary white youth in specific geographic regions. It considers how patterns of migration and settlement influence young people’s understandings of whiteness, social space and



ethnic minority communities. Through a series of youth profiles Part II explores how young people can enact whiteness in rather different ways to reveal how geographical context and social class also inflect these processes. The chapters comprise various studies of whiteness that include the experiences of racist youth, anti-racist youth and the large number of young people who oscillate between potentially racist and anti-racist discourses.

The first empirical study explored in Chapter 5 concerns a masculine cohort of Skinhead youth on an outer-city estate in the West Midlands. The geographic location of these young men in the suburban outreaches was found to be an important social factor that influenced the constitution of localised, white English masculinities in the neighbourhood setting. It is suggested that the styles of white masculinity inhabited were defined both against an imagined black inner city and the surrounding middle-class suburbs. The reasons for including a chapter on the West Midlands are manifold. At a biographical level the study is a reflection of my own time spent living and researching in the district. Indeed, the Skinhead responses provided me with the impetus to look for new forms of white ethnic belonging and in this way triggered my investigation into whiteness. Furthermore, the study signals a departure from previous cultural studies work in the area where the emphasis was predominantly with rituals of resistance and subcultural style rather than the actual ethnographic evidence gleaned here from young people themselves. An obvious contribution offered in the study of English Skins involves making whiteness visible in subculture. More subtly, the inclusion of another locality alongside the Tyneside conurbation allows for some degree of comparison but more accurately provides us with a better appreciation of space, place and region. The inclusion of a Skinhead subculture who espouse pronounced racist opinions offers a resounding example of how whiteness and English nationalism can come to be intertwined in young people's biographies. Overall, the chapter is a bridging point that marks a break from previous youth enquiries and heralds the emergence of a new cultural perspective to the study of youth, ethnicity and subculture.

The data analysis in this chapter focuses upon the inconsistencies found in the style, language, argot and musical preferences of this contemporary Skinhead subculture. Here, the Skinheads were found to offer a 'spectacular' performance of whiteness that was in marked contrast to the normative and mundane status it occupied in the lives of the majority of young people. It is argued that precisely because whiteness was felt to be in crisis at a number of levels it was virulently asserted in the space of the local. Through ethnographic interviews and observations the chapter traces the ways in which a working-class subculture could effectively produce itself as white. Moreover, the chapter considers why a stratum of working class youth, that happen to live on a peripheral mainly-white estate, should wish to enact such an exaggerated 'Pale Warrior' stance.

In the ensuing chapters the geographical emphasis shifts from the Midlands to the Tyneside conurbation in the Northeast of England. In Chapter 6 I ask the question who is 'Geordie' and provide a social observation of the region that documents the history of migration and settlement in the area. Here, I reflect on the experience of race and ethnicity in Tyneside, paying particular attention to the significance of a local, 'Geordie' identity in the district. I suggest that 'Geordie' can be deployed in these contexts as an unspoken form of white ethnicity that can be detected in a multiplicity of social practices. Moreover, the chapter investigates moments of resistance to fascists, nationalists and far-Right extremists in the region. It argues that these instances can be read as genuine, organic forms of anti-racism that we have much to learn from. In the light of this analysis I claim that a more socially inclusive notion of 'Geordie' can yet be established that is sensitive to the unique history of race and migration in the region.

The social and historical background of Tyneside outlined in Chapter 6 forms the context for the following empirical chapters. Chapter 7 sets out to document young people's responses to white identity and discusses the possibilities for future anti-racist practice. The research found that while many youth agreed with the egalitarian principles of anti-racism, a majority maintained a number of white grievances that

they felt could be rarely articulated. This dissatisfaction was exemplified in forms of racist name-calling, where it was perceived that the existing legislation was 'unfair' in its treatment of the ethnic majority. Indeed, evidence of a 'white backlash' could be traced in the emotional responses of young people who believed that anti-racism and multiculturalism were effectively techniques for the surveillance of white cultural identity. The chapter also points towards ways in which white, English ethnicities can be positively deconstructed by students and teachers through forms of story-telling, auto/biography and local historical research. Here, the emphasis is on the 'undoing' of whiteness and is particularly concerned with suggesting practical pedagogic interventions. The chapter marks an attempt to involve, rather than alienate, white youth in policies of social equity.

Chapter 8 contrasts two intra-ethnic subcultural responses to whiteness detected amongst young people within the locality. The cultural styles and social practices of each of these groups is related to the historical geography of the region and draws attention a series of fractures within working-class culture. Thus, the 'Real Geordies' were a male group who are found to be part of a labour aristocracy that share with one another a familial background of skilled manual labour. The remnant of this experience enables them to make symbolic connections with one another through the recognised tropes of 'Geordie' identity - football, drinking and having a 'laff'. In an increasingly uncertain economy these shared and long-established rituals offer the reassurance of a readily identifiable, 'traditional' masculine role. For the most part, whiteness is experienced by the subculture as normative. But it is precisely at moments when alternative forms of 'Geordie' are being articulated that the group become increasingly exacting over who can take up the gauntlet of local identity. A comparative Tyneside subculture that I shall investigate comprised a collection of lower working class, inner-city youth known as 'Charver Kids'. The Charvers are said to have a propensity for crime, come from large families and like the Victorian urban poor discussed in Chapter 1, are invariably racialised. Charver Kids are frequently depicted as dirty, immoral and stupid; moreover, their bodily comportment is constructed as hunched over and physically retarded. Living in the run-down districts of the West End, the Charvers occupy a particular racial geography that has

encouraged them to be portrayed as the not-quite-white of Tyneside. It is argued that the subculture forms the residue of a modern, urban underclass. Significantly, the two Tyneside subcultures define themselves in relation to one another and in doing so draw attention to the intra-ethnic mutability of white identity amongst young people in British contexts. The discursive enactment of a 'rough' and 'respectable' working class culture is at stake in this acute delineation.

If Part I focused upon *engaging* with whiteness and Part II examined the *doing* of whiteness, it would be accurate to consider the final section to be concerned with *re-thinking* whiteness. In Part III our attention now turns to the potential new subject positions available to white youth within 'multi-racist Britain' (Cohen & Bains, 1988). As we shall go on to find, young people are in the process of negotiating new ethnic identities and in doing so are challenging many of the assumptions associated with white ethnic behaviour, whatever that may be. In this respect the final section considers how whiteness is being resisted, challenged and transformed in the everyday cultures of young people. The chapters draw upon ethnographic and life history methods to establish the existence of emergent counter-narratives to white oppression. While it may be premature to regard these embryonic accounts as ideal future templates for a more reflexive white English ethnicity, the responses nevertheless reveal how young people are embarking upon the 'making' of a new cultural heritage.

Chapter 9 turns to the examination of a youth subculture comprising 'B-Boyz', 'wannabes' and 'race traitors' - young people who have taken on the full blazonary of black cultural style in their daily practices. Whereas groups like the Skinheads and Real Geordies seek to defend and authenticate whiteness to recoup power, the B-Boyz and white wannabes are involved in an imaginative and at times transgressive re-ordering of white identity. Instead of consolidating whiteness the Boyz and their ilk were found to experiment with cultural identity, effecting what Stuart Hall (1993) has described as 'New Ethnicities'. These identities were not stained with the glory of nationalism identified by Paul Gilroy (1995[1987]) in his text *There Ain't No Black in*

*the Union Jack*, but were at times deeply critical of white patriotism. Key spaces for ethnic experimentation became the sport of basketball and the arena of dance from which members developed an interest in urban African-American styles of dress, music, language and posture. The experiences of these white mavericks affirm them as Britain's contemporary 'White Negroes'.

The final empirical study in Chapter 10 draws upon ten contemporary life histories of whiteness. In this respect there is a shift in emphasis from the study of social collectivities (subcultures, youth peer-groups and the Skinhead 'gang') towards individual memoirs and personal biographies. This provides a more in-depth examination of whiteness in a participant's lifeways and allows us to penetrate beneath the skin of the particular individual concerned. The chapter includes written biographies, narratives and oral testimonies drawn from a mixed, multi-ethnic sample. Life-history method was used to elaborate on the remarkable experience of a select number of participants who most directly addressed the experience of whiteness. For those living in subordinated existence to white norms, the 'terror of whiteness' (hooks, 1993[1992]) could only be handled through recourse to a series of complex negotiations. Moreover, continual dealings with white assumption had left psychic traces upon some respondents who felt increasingly wary of being judged and unable to live up to the exacting qualities of whiteness. The chapter includes responses from ethnic majority individuals some of whom experienced their cultural identities as the unfortunate 'burden of whiteness'. Here, whiteness was not unambiguously a marker of privilege but entailed particular social costs such as guilt or a self-imposed restraint. The life histories, then, offer rare and valuable critiques of whiteness and may be considered as counter-narratives from which there is much to learn.

# **‘Imperial Shadows’**

## **A Social History of how the British Became White**

### **Chapter 1**

## Introduction

In his encyclopaedic study *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson (1982[1968]) documents the history of labour relations at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. Here, the focus is very much with the formation of working-class identities and the variety of cultural practices undertaken. In this first chapter my reference point also remains with class but it further encompasses the ethnicities of the English working-, middle- and lower-classes. Instead, I am not just concerned with the ‘making’ of the working class but rather with the *making of white English ethnicity*. An ethnographic method is deployed in future chapters in order to examine the contemporary production of white identities within specific geographic contexts (Chapters 4, 6, 7). However, as we shall go on to find there is a longstanding tradition of English urban ethnographies related to people and places. In particular we may turn our attention to a number of nineteenth century social observations that graphically depict urban living in the industrial period. A recurring theme in these early accounts remains the preoccupation with the lives of the poor and the middle-class obsession with the ‘horrors’ of working-class culture. As such, this opening chapter endeavours to move beyond a ‘moral panic’ that views working-class people as marauding animals unleashed within an urban jungle. In contrast, it demonstrates that the depiction of the English working-class as primitive people with a distinct set of racial characteristics is more illuminating of the darkest fears of the bourgeoisie and their efforts to become white, than the lives of the urban impoverished.

In order to comprehend the varied responses to white ethnicity, I will begin by mapping the industrial development of whiteness in English cities from the mid-nineteenth century up until the arrival of settlers from the New Commonwealth countries in the late 1950s. In this respect, I am concerned to divulge a somewhat clandestine narrative, the story of *how the British social classes became white*. At present there is a paucity of research on the historiography of white English ethnicity; this has given way to an all too ready assumption that the British social classes have been ‘forever white’. In contrast I will demonstrate how the concept of whiteness was used to demarcate between differing social groups and how this process was inflected

not least by issues of locality and social class. Here, the historical analysis indicates that ideas concerning who was socially included as white have radically altered over time. Moreover, notions of whiteness can be shown to be both historically and contextually contingent. It is only by being attentive to the cultural formation of white ethnicity in English urban and suburban districts that an appreciation for the nuances of whiteness may be achieved. Rather than interpreting whiteness as a 'natural' and unchanging descriptor of British peoples, the implications are that the identity 'white' can be better understood as contingent, a shifting set of relations tenuously constituted in the realm of the social.

### **Historical Portraits of Life in the English Inner City**

'As there is a darkest Africa is there not also a darkest England?' - William Booth (1890)<sup>8</sup>.

The geography of Britain at the turn of the Industrial Revolution was to witness profound and long-lasting social change. As the process of urbanisation grew apace, divisions between town and country, rich and poor, work and leisure became ever more acute. The spatial divisions were notably more apparent as respectable bourgeois housing was frequently located in areas where the working classes would be expunged from sight. The routes into these neighbourhoods were also carefully laid out so as not to be down-wind of what was believed to be the foul stench of working-class squalor. Indeed, the sojourn to the English urban interior was directly compared with journeys into Central Africa; here, the city became a site to be 'penetrated' by social explorers and middle class voyeurs alike, a theme Peter Keating (1976) exemplifies in his classic compilation, *Into Unknown England 1866-1913*. He remarks how for many period writers, 'The poor inhabit a separate "country" which remains to be discovered by the wealthy' but in this case, 'the distant tribes live not in Africa or India, but in Soho, East London, Manchester or Birmingham' (p.14).

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<sup>8</sup> Cited in Keating (1976:145).



Raymond Williams (1973) develops this theme in *The Country and the City* when he reveals how, ‘Conditions in the East End were being described as “unknown” and “unexplored” ... in the middle of the century, and by the 1880s and 1890s “Darkest London” was a conventional epithet’ (p.221). Meanwhile, the cultural geographer Peter Jackson also reminds us how, ‘Working-class districts were likened to immense *terrae incognitae* which were periodically visited by intrepid explorers and zealous missionaries from more prosperous parts of town’ (1995[1989]:89). He further points to the popular circulation of texts such as William Booth’s *In Darkest England* (1890) and Reverend Osborne Jay’s similarly named, *Life in Darkest London* (1891). We may also reflect on titles such as John Hollingshead’s *Ragged London in 1861*; James Greenwood’s *The Wilds of London* (1874); and George Gissing’s *The Nether World* (1889), or his later edition *New Grub Street* (1891), as further examples of the genre. Even so, Henry Mayhew’s less spectacularly entitled portrait, *London Labour and the London Poor*, remains the most famous account having been first published in a series of articles for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849 and 1850 before being later expanded. As we shall find, within the genre of slum literature the bourgeois imperial gaze was turned towards and then writ large on English urban centres and the bodies of the working-class peoples who resided there.

The comparison between British inner cities and the African jungle bespoke hidden national anxieties. According to Jonathan Raban, for many fearful middle-class spectators the notion of London ‘as an African jungle, was more of an understatement than an exaggeration’ (1975[1974]:95) during the days of the British Empire. Thus, the nineteenth century founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, came to describe the nation’s capital as a ‘dark forest’ in 1890 in his book *In Darkest England and the Way Out*. Iain Chambers (1988) also describes how Victorians hoped to one day ‘tame’ the cities, having perceived them as a working-class wilderness. Accordingly he writes, ‘Moral rearmament, in the form of religion, the temperance movement, schooling and education, was despatched to the “Hottentots” in the slums of “darkest England”’ (pp.23-24). A vivid example of this magical transference from the ‘wilds’ of the African jungle to the English city can also be found in Hardy’s monstrous description of London as ‘a molluscous black creature having nothing in

common with humanity, that takes the shape of the streets along which it has lain itself, and throws out horrid excrescences and limbs into neighbouring alleys; a creature whose voice exudes from its scaly coat and who has an eye in every pore of its body' (cited by Williams, 1973b:216). It would appear that urbanisation was most indelibly leaving its mark on the landscape of the nation and that this did not go unnoticed.

Throughout the nineteenth century the city of London was especially subject to a number of reports concerning population, drainage, housing and medical health which occurred alongside a perception that the metropolis was becoming a 'cesspool city' (Wilson, 1991:26). In an all too graphic depiction Elizabeth Wilson continues:

Horse-drawn transport meant that dung mingled with mud and often rain to create a liquid manure that spread filth on pavements and even clothing ... The smells from tanneries, slaughter houses, glue factories and other industries were often unbearable (p.29).

While the English capital was frequently the focus of attention, other districts did not escape the accompanying repulsion of wide-scale urbanisation and the heady throng of working-class people. Liverpool, Leeds, Birmingham, Bolton, Salford and Britain's 'workshop of the world', Manchester, were just some of the industrial cities in which nation-wide tabulated and statistical reports were conducted. Certainly there remained a consensus that cities were in danger of contaminating the imaginary rural English way of life and that this would give way to a new, alien urban breed. In *Hard Times* which was published in 1894, Charles Dickens compares the developing Northern industrial area to 'a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage' (cited in Clayre 1985[1977]:124). Elsewhere, in a somewhat gentler account of the process of urbanisation in Hunslet during the 1930s, Richard Hoggart (1966:24) discusses the feelings of his parental generation who had the growing sense of 'towns staining the countryside' as their Northern population expanded.

Consequently, the lines between poverty, race and urban decay rapidly became entangled in post-industrial Britain.

*'White' migrants and the urban poor*

While urbanisation was thought to leave cancerous black spots on the underbelly of the nation it also brought with it further problems, not least that of foreign immigration. At the time of the Industrial Revolution there existed a particular fear that Irish migrants were spreading corruption and disease to the lower echelons of the English labouring poor, inducing habits such as drunkenness, laziness, theft and a social disregard for hygiene. Irish settler colonies in Liverpool and the so-called 'Little Ireland slum' in Manchester were targeted for their poor sanitation and 'lapse' in moral fortitude. Moreover, it was suggested that the Irish actually *preferred* to live in slum housing districts. As the social geographer Richard Dennis (1984) has indicated, when it came to the interpretation of Victorian health and hygiene reports 'the message was clear: disease was associated with both high-density living and an Irish population' (p.58). In other words, invidious connections between poverty and race were already being made. Thus, the longstanding depiction of Irish migrants who came to England in the wake of the great potato famine portrayed these settlers as ape-like, stupid and drunkard. Subsequently, the socialist historian Peter Alexander (1987:17) describes the Irish as 'White Niggers' and cites a memorable passage from the novelist and clergyman Charles Kingsley who visited the West of Ireland in 1860. The writer recounts how he felt 'haunted by human chimpanzees' and then goes on to declare how, 'To see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much' (p.18). Given these social stereotypes it may be unsurprising to learn that Irish settlers routinely topped polls in England and Scotland when it came to jail sentencing<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The Irish were five times more likely to be imprisoned than the English in England and ten times more in Scotland.

Irish communities, along with the Russians, Poles and Jews who later arrived in the East End, were all seen to be a notch or two further down the social hierarchy<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, stereotypes about the Jewish 'take-over' of London abounded as large numbers arrived to the East End from the 1880s; thus, in Stepney in 1905 the proportion of Jewish settlers was around 40 percent. This was met with resistance for in 1902 the British Brothers League had a membership of 45,000 who campaigned to discourage East European immigration, fearing it posed a threat to the vitality of 'English stock'<sup>11</sup>. There remains longstanding evidence pertaining to the existence of anti-Semitic and fascist organisations in the East End. If we take the case of Bethnal Green for example the lineage is extensive. Early groups include: The Britons (1818), the British Empire Union (1919), the National Citizens Union (1919), the Imperial Fascism League (1929), the British Union of Fascists (1932) and the National Socialist League (1937). As the social historian Joanna Bourke (1994) acknowledges, 'Jew-baiting, the impaling of pigs' heads on poles wrapped in Union Jacks and placed in front of synagogues, fascist graffiti, and the destruction of Jewish property expressed the willingness of many East End residents to make Jews into scapegoats for local social and economic ills' (p.199). Meanwhile, Louis Heren (1973) who grew up in the East End at the time of early Eastern European immigration speculates, 'The beards and side-curls of the Orthodox were absolutely foreign, and their demeanour occasionally frightening' (p.10). The decisive struggle occurred though in 1936 at the celebrated 'Battle of Cable Street', when Oswald Mosely's Fascist Blackshirts were repelled by Communists, Jews and other East End inhabitants from marching through the predominantly Jewish zones. Over time interestingly, these migrant ethnic communities would all be able to lay claim to some form of whiteness as processes of assimilation began.

In contrast to the city the countryside had become - and enduringly remains - the canvas upon which dreams of nationhood, Englishness and whiteness are constructed (a theme developed in Chapter 4). In this section, our primary concern is with

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<sup>10</sup> For example in his autobiography of growing up in the East End, Louis Heren (1973:11) notes a famous Irish song, *No Jews allowed down Wapping*.

<sup>11</sup> At the time, the 1901 Census records that there were 95,425 Russians and Poles in the UK of whom 53,537 had settled in London.

urbanisation and the meaning of race in English cities. For contemporary social geographers, whiteness can be said to enact spatial boundaries, forming what David Sibley (1995) has described as part of a wider 'geography of exclusion'. He claims that, 'As a marker of the boundary between purified interior spaces - the home, the nation, and so on - and exterior threats posed by dirt, disorderly minorities or immigrants, white is still a potent symbol' (1995:24). These ideas are similar to those put forward by the social anthropologist Mary Douglas in her acclaimed study *Purity and Danger* (1966), where contamination must be avoided through strict rituals of demarcation. Just as splits between town and country were made, fragmentation within the English city also prevailed. These processes of separation were an integral means by which the Victorian and Edwardian elite were able to keep their distance from the 'untouchable' urban poor, and in so doing they could effect what Andrew Davies has likened to a form of 'informal apartheid' (1992:42).

Spatial distinctions between the West and East End of London provide a powerful example of this demarcation. In the historical portrait *Outcast London*, Gareth Stedman Jones (1984 [1971]) addresses the peculiar relationship between the East and West End districts of the metropolis. In particular he draws attention to the geographic and socio-economic split between the casual 'residuum' and the 'respectable' working class, the modern day articulations of which were found to be still present in the Tyneside community in this study (Chapter 7). According to Stedman Jones (1984) Victorian fears persisted as to the extent of the 'residuum', and the possibility that the labouring classes would soon be dragged in a downward spiral to the level of the transient poor. Underlying these bourgeois anxieties were fears of an amalgamation between the working class and the 'residuum' that could result in social unrest and a national revolution.

As such, it was not just migrant settlers who were removed from whiteness but East-Enders and the socially impoverished who were each treated with a degree of disdain by the bourgeoisie as we shall go on to find. Consequently, a number of Victorian and Edwardian writers continued to use metaphors of darkness to convey the poverty-

stricken lives of urban working-classes. Thus George R. Sims wrote of 'the dark side of life' and suggested that if an artist were to depict these quarters, 'in the slums he can use but one colour; all is a monotone - a sombre gray [sic] deepening into the blackness of night' (1976:78). More importantly, these colours made symbolic connections with the lands colonised by the British Empire. In studying the 'wild races' who form the urban poor, Sims claimed to be relating 'a journey into a region which lies at our own doors - into a dark continent that is within easy walking distance of the General Post Office' (pp.65-66). It was this 'Dark Continent' which the urban poor inhabited that so fascinated and repelled bourgeois social commentators of the period as they drew parallels with journeys to the African interior. In the writings of William Booth (1890) comparisons between Africa and life in the English city were found to be equally irresistible: 'the stony streets of London, if they could but speak, would tell of tragedies as awful, of ruin as complete, of ravishments as horrible, as if we were in Central Africa ...' (cited in Keatings, 1976:147).

In this way the processes of industrialisation were thought to have produced treacherous urban jungles (see Chapter 7). What is remarkable in these period accounts is the racialisation of a not-so-white working-class people and their urban environments. Through a series of metaphors and similes the bourgeoisie made an elitist claim to whiteness that was not held out to the 'dark masses' in the metropolitan interior. The social historian Gareth Stedman Jones has noted how this emotive language could be used to describe the urban poor in this period:

The poor lived in inaccessible places, in "dens", in "swamps", in the "deeps", in the "wilds", or in the "abyss". The "Light" of "civilisation" did not shine upon them because they dwelt in "the shadows", "the shade", "the nether world", the "darkest" regions (1987[1983]:183).

In the bourgeois imagination, then, whiteness could be deployed to organise space in the city. Moreover, it became a means of imposing a social order by categorising and classifying the spectrum of communities that resided therein. At a symptomatic level, bourgeois discourses concerning the ‘dark masses’ can be understood as linguistic techniques by which the middle class could produce themselves as white. Thus, by writing about the ‘foreign’ nature of sections of the city and the lower-class inhabitants who resided there, the bourgeoisie could in turn effect a socially exclusive white identity. As we shall go on to find, it was through a symbolically dark working-class body that the middle classes could most effectively construe themselves to be white during this period. We will now turn our attention to how the bourgeois ‘literature of voyeurism’ (Wilson, 1991:27) was used as a discourse through which the bodies of different social classes could be registered. Here, it is argued that working-class bodies were depicted as anatomically distinct from their bourgeois counterparts and furthermore that this process of differentiation was inflected through the established notions of race.

*‘A race apart’: Corporeal representations of the urban poor*

An inescapable dimension of the imperial project abroad was the social classification of British peoples at home. A familiar refrain in early observations remained that the rich and poor in Britain were essentially ‘Two Nations’. Eric Hobsbawm (1968[1982]:282) extends the metaphor when he notes how ‘the “two nations” might have been living in different continents’. The middle class repulsion for poverty implicit in early Victorian novels and social documentaries was part of a larger cartography that both encompassed the urban landscape and was mapped onto working-class bodies. Thus, the investigative journalist Henry Mayhew (1967) spoke of London’s ‘wandering tribes’ of ‘Bushmen’ and ‘Hottentot Sonquas’, making a direct comparison between black people and beggars. According to Mayhew, ‘white beggars’ who were ‘fortunate enough to possess a flattish or turned-up nose, dyed themselves black and “stood pad” as real Africans’ (1950:391). Just as the inner city was a small step from being like the African jungle, the urban poor were little removed from the Hottentot or Negro savages of nineteenth-century imperial adventure stories. Other writers have compared Mayhew’s hierarchical depiction of

city life to a form of racial classification where the emphasis is less on social class dynamics and more akin to 'a honeycomb of caste groups' (Raban 1975:97).

Such descriptions of the working-class body are present in a broad range of Victorian historiography, indeed, Mathew Arnold described London's East-End inhabitants as a mass of 'sunken people' (cited in Stedman Jones, 1984:241). In this sense the poor were increasingly referred to as a 'backward people' who were deemed to have particular racial traits. For example, Booth goes on to equate the African tribes the explorer H. M. Stanley encountered in the Equatorial forest with the denizens of the English working classes:

The two tribes of savages, the human baboon and the handsome dwarf  
... may be accepted as the two varieties who are continually present  
with us - the vicious, lazy lout, and the toiling slave (1976:145).

For Booth, London was populated with 'colonies of heathens and savages' (p.150) who came to form the 'submerged tenth' he so enjoyed to eulogise about. Elsewhere, Robert Sherard further extends the idea of the urban poor as the new primitives of society in his publication, *The White Slaves of England* (1897). In an oral history of slum-life in Salford, Robert Roberts (1987[1971]:26) similarly identifies the impoverished washerwomen during the first quarter of the century as 'white slaves'. Elsewhere, Marks (1996) has written about the preponderance of Jewish women involved in prostitution in the East End at the turn of the century and the development of a white slave trade. Evidence of the corporeal depiction of impoverished white migrants can be found in the text *Charles Booth's London* (1971). In Charles Booth's depiction of the metropolis we find the Victorian social-class analyst using a bodily schema to describe the passage of early Polish and Russian Jews coming up the Thames Estuary to settle in the East End:



For the most part they are men between twenty and forty years of age, of slight and stooping stature, of sallow and pinched countenance, with low foreheads, high cheek-bones and protruding lips. They wear uncouth and dirt-bespattered garments, they mutter to each other in a strange tongue ... in their eyes an indescribable expression of hunted, suffering animals ... (Fried & Elman, 1971).

At first glance these sallow-skinned migrants appear closer to animals than the corpus of white civilisation<sup>12</sup>. The anthropomorphic portrayal of white migrants and the urban poor as animals was a recurring motif during the period. In the late-nineteenth century, Victorian observers such as the Liberal MP C.F.G. Masterman reflected on what they understood to be the 'plague' of the lower orders:

Our streets have suddenly become congested with a weird and uncanny people ... They have poured in as dense black masses from the eastern railways; they have streamed across the bridges from the marshes and desolate place beyond the river; they have been hurried up in incredible number through tubes sunk in the bowels of the earth, emerging like rats from a drain, blinking in the sunshine ... Whence did they all come, these creatures with strange antics and manners, these denizens of another universe of being?. (Cited in Keatings, 1976, pp.241-242).

The notion that poverty-stricken people 'poured' and 'streamed' into English cities was later evoked in the 1980s with subsequent New Right discourses which appealed to an imaginary sense of British decency to acknowledge that 'immigrants' were now 'swamping' the nation. As such, constructs of race and class may be articulated through one another. Thus, in the above extract the urban poor are seen as 'dense black masses' and vividly compared with rats, in what Masterman believed to be the birth of a mutant and subhuman new race. The surreptitious representation of the urban poor as alien, teeming hoards carrying all manner of disease was secured in the hated symbol of the rat. Indeed, the rat can be said to signify the defiled, 'polluted'

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<sup>12</sup> By 1895 this migrant community had established an organisation known as the Jewish Lads' Brigade in the East End to help Anglicise newly arrived Jewish boys.

Other which was ritually segregated from the 'purified' spaces of the bourgeoisie. In Chapter 7 we will go on to discuss how similar discourses were attributed to contemporary youth in Tyneside by way of a subcultural study of 'Rat boy' Charver Kids. More lately, David Sibley (1995) has also pointed to the depiction of Jews, Gypsies and Irish peoples as vermin at various historical conjunctures. For Sibley, 'The potency of the rat as an abject symbol is heightened through its role as a carrier of disease, its occasional tendency to violate boundaries by entering people's homes, and its prolific breeding' (p.28). It was precisely these aspects - disease, invasion and breeding - that were especially reserved for the depiction of ethnic minority communities. After a similar fashion, Edward Denison likened the market dwellers of London's Petticoat Lane to a 'trembling mass of maggots in a lump of carrion' (cited in Stedman Jones 1984:258). In this sense white migrants and the East-End labouring poor were in the main seen to be *bodily distinct* from their bourgeois counterparts. At times, they were felt to embody the characteristics of animals: they were 'human baboons' and were implicitly savage, unpredictable and sexually unrestrained. In other moments, this living abomination were portrayed as parasitic vermin who could be easily likened to rats and maggots.

Furthermore, the urban impoverished were frequently depicted as having off-white skin tones and poor physiques. When describing London's nineteenth century East End inhabitants George Gissing claimed they lived in a 'sordid-looking wilderness' in which 'people had a white dull skin that looked degenerate and ominous to the West-end eye' (cited in Williams, 1973b:229). We may also turn to the accounts of Lord Brabazon who remarked that if the Victorian reader were of an average height and passed through the poorer parts of London, 'he will find himself a head taller than those around him; he will see on all sides pale faces, stunted figures, debilitated forms, narrow chests, and all the outward signs of a low vital power' (cited in Stedman Jones 1984:308). The nutritional effects of poverty on working-class subjects are noted by Joanna Bourke (1994:41-42) who reports, 'The working-class body looked different from the middle-class body: it was leaner, shorter, and less healthy'. The notion of the impoverished lower classes as gaunt and physically

retarded with an off-white pallor is also given voice in a number of period novels, where the industrial city (often night-time London) is depicted as filled with beggars, prostitutes, vagabonds and murderers. The dingy, narrow cobbled-streets combine with the industrial smog to become synonymous in popular representation of the late nineteenth-century city as a chaotic, dangerous place, an unknowable continent where the threat of Jack the Ripper is always imminent.

The image of a 'Dark Continent' was graphically revisited in a number of gothic and realist novels of the time, including those authored by Conan Doyle, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Wilkie Collins and Elizabeth Gaskell. An example of the urban horror and fascination with the working-class body can be found in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* first published in 1885. Here, the 'savage' Mr Hyde with his 'ape-like fury' (in Bell, 1993:118) most closely comes to resemble the 'slum monkey' that is a symbol of the debauched and uncontrollable working-classes (Chambers, 1988[1986]:26). Consider this extract, when the bourgeois lawyer Mr Utterson is looking for his medical compatriot Dr Jekyll and stumbles instead upon the grotesque Edward Hyde:

Mr Hyde was pale and dwarfish; he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation, he had a displeasing smile, he had borne himself to the lawyer with a sort of murderous mixture of timidity and boldness, and he spoke with a husky, whispering, and somewhat broken voice - all these were points against him; but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing, and fear with which Mr Utterson regarded him (pp.112-113).

This unknown and unknowable fear and loathing experienced by the professional Mr Utterson, can be read symptomatically as a bourgeois horror for working-class bodies.

What is clear in each of these early accounts is the emergence of a pseudo-scientific hierarchy in which the English urban working-classes, white migrants and the peoples

of the colonised nations came to occupy the lowest evolutionary rungs. According to the social historian Jose Harris (1994[1993]) concepts of race based on essential biological characteristics only came to the fore from around 1870. Harris goes on to remark upon an 1884 meeting of the Social Science Association, in which a spokesman from the London Working Men's Association protested against the fashion for 'talking of the working class as though they were some new-found race or extinct animal' (p.236). Indeed, the working-class body was thought to be ingrained with dirt, diseased, wizened and decrepit. Moreover, it was felt that the frail comportment of the urban impoverished reflected their weak moral character. Everything about their demeanour suggested that these denizens could never be proper, 'upstanding' members of society in the unforgiving eyes of the bourgeoisie. Thus, working-class subjects were socially excluded from whiteness as their bourgeois counterparts took on the mantle of white privilege.

In an introduction to John Hollingshead's *Ragged London in 1861*, Anthony Wohl makes a telling, if underdeveloped observation about the depiction of slum dwellers in the urban study. The off-hand remark fleetingly alludes to the social construction of whiteness as a concept that was beyond the grasp of the industrial urban poor. It is alleged that, 'the inhabitants of the slums are "swarthy", or "sallow", or have "yellow faces", or are blackened with soot, or possess "dark sinister faces" - any colour, it would seem, but white' (Wohl, 1986:xix). A powerful observation indeed, but why were the faces and bodies of socially inferior classes never represented as white? Paul Hoch explains:

... the men of the established social classes in the West have often depicted themselves as being somehow both *more white and more moral* than their social class inferiors. The two qualities were often seen as closely connected. Though on the base of mere physical appearance the colour of the elite might be mistaken for grey, pink, beige, pale or whatever, none of them would have had the same connotations of moral purity and heroic manliness as '*white*' [original emphasis] (1979:49).

Whiteness *per se* was then less of an issue: what it symbolised was of more interest. The 'dark sinister faces' of the weak lower orders contrasted only too purposefully with the 'heroic manliness' of the almighty bourgeoisie. Moreover, such representations could work doubly at global and local levels: on one hand it asserted a righteous imperial might abroad, while on the other it reinstated the power of white middle-class males at home. In so doing, adherence to the narratives of race and Empire - so tightly interwoven with loyalty to crown and country - could be subtly reworked to overlap with emergent discourses of the poor as racially distinct. The imperial shadow this cast on sections of the urban poor was such that, like their colonial counterparts, the British lower classes were seen to require the civilising light of bourgeois morality. This is evident in the urban literature described and the organised forms of social control that were administered by way of religion, education and temperance movements.

These measures of discipline and control illustrated the supposed unpredictability of working-class bodies and the fear in which they were held. Jonathan Raban (1975) describes the colonial inflection that accompanied the bourgeois corporeal depiction of working-class people:

If the image of the native in the Africa of Empire was of a grinning black simpleton whose worst faults were his laziness and stupidity - or of a crazed Hottentot brandishing a wooden spear - the street people of London presented a face that was more inscrutably foreign, more complex, ultimately more menacing ... (p.95).

Insisting that the British working class were a 'new-found race' with 'inscrutably foreign' facial features, meant their exclusion from whiteness was assured. Even by the beginning of the twentieth century, Hobsbawm (1982) is able to compare the plight of the English working class with that of the American Negro: 'The contacts between working-class and upper-class life (apart from servants) were hardly closer than those between white and Negro life in the inter-war USA'. He goes on to reflect on the corresponding fetishisation of working-class culture, 'the upper-class or

intellectual fashion for patronising boxers, jockeys, prostitutes and the music hall', which he claims amount to 'hardly more than the passion of some whites for jazz' (pp.281-291). A further example of the racialised, corporeal discourse can be found in Louis Heren's (1973) autobiography, *Growing Up Poor in London* where the author, born in the East End district of Shadwell<sup>13</sup> in 1919, reflects how Cockneys such as himself were believed to be a *race apart*<sup>14</sup>. In support of this notion Joanna Bourke found that up until at least the Second World War there was a belief that "Englishmen" live in the West rather than in the East End' (1994:172) of the city. She goes on to cite the account of Dr Harry Roberts from East-End London who recalls a middle-class perception of working-class members as 'a distinct species of animal, or, any rate, a distinct variety of man' (p.184), notions that were to only gradually alter with the expansion of education.

More significant is that the bodies of the labouring classes and the urban poor were seen to be anatomically different from that of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, this difference was not accorded to social factors such as living conditions, working environments or nutritional intake: it was seen to be *natural* to the 'species' of the lower orders. Social Darwinian concepts related to evolution, survival of the fittest and the ability to adapt to particular environments (in this case the emergent capitalist economy), could be strategically deployed to further legitimate the proprietorship of the bourgeoisie. In the final instance, this intellectual appropriation could be used to assert that the English middle classes were naturally better suited to the conditions of industrialisation, moreover, their superiority (moral, physical, economic and cultural) was all but inevitable - after all it was the law of the jungle! Interspersed in these arguments using corporeal schemas was the implicit (and sometimes explicit) suggestion that the working-classes were not white. In this sense, the attendant meanings of whiteness in nineteenth-century Britain were refracted through the prism of class relations and alleged corporeal differences.

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<sup>13</sup> Shadwell was in the borough formerly known as Stepney but is now part of Tower Hamlets.

<sup>14</sup> Heren recalls the unique ethnic composition of Shadwell: 'The native-born Cockneys were certainly a minority and the majority were immigrants, mainly Irish Catholics and Polish Jews. Some African and West Indian seamen had married local women and settled down. One of the ropes, or lodging houses, was home for Indian pedlars, Sikhs who hawked garish scarves and shawls in the poorer districts of London' (1973:10).

An example of this can be found when Phil Cohen (1988:32) cites Lord Milner's remark on seeing English soldiers bathing that revealed he 'never knew the working classes had such white skins'. Furthermore, Victorian observers such as George R. Sims believed the working-classes were the embodiment of grime and that this was a symbol of their moral depravity. Sims complained, 'Dirtiness is ingrained in them, and if they had decent habitations provided for them tomorrow, they would no more live in them than a gipsy [sic.] could settle down under any but a canvas roof' (1976:79). Here, it was not the social conditions that were to blame for grime, but working-class people themselves. During this period working class peoples were most brutally espoused as the nation's Great Unwashed - an image which conjured up a teeming mass of blackened, sweating, toiling bodies. By contrast, lower middle-class workers from clerks to office personnel could always take solace that in the final analysis they were 'white collar', 'clean-handed' workers who never dirtied themselves with industrial labour.

Victorian commentators such as Samuel Smith were even more direct. He compared the poor with the sewage floating in the Thames estuary and wrote of the need to 'deoderize, so to speak, this foul humanity' (cited by Stedman Jones, 1984[1971]:310). Such ideas tied in with Lord Brabazon's concept of 'national hygiene' that was to become a central tenet of Edwardian welfare-state political thought. Elizabeth Wilson has also written of the connections made between excreta and working class peoples:

For the Victorians excrement became a metaphor and a symbol for moral filth, perhaps even for the working class itself, and when they spoke and wrote of the cleansing of the city of filth, refuse and dung, they may really have longed to rid the cities of the labouring poor altogether (1991:37).

As we shall go on to discover in subsequent chapters, the metaphors of excrement - so liberally applied to the Victorian and Edwardian urban poor - were later to become a central trope for the racist abuse of black British communities.

### *Gender, class and sexual mores*

The notion of the working-class corpus as 'ingrained' with dirt, had a broader signification that implied a sense of low morality. Thus, former prostitutes and 'loose' women fought to establish themselves as decent, 'clean-living' citizens. In *Landscape for a Good Woman* Carolyn Steedman (1993[1986]) memorably captures the way notions of cleanliness were used as a technique of surveillance and control on the working-class body.

I found a reference written by the local doctor for my mother who, about 1930, applied for a job as a ward-maid at the local asylum, confirming that she was clean, strong, honest and intelligent. I wept over that, of course, for a world where some people might doubt her - my - cleanliness. I didn't care much about the honesty, and I know I was strong; but there are people everywhere waiting for you to slip up, to show signs of dirtiness and stupidity, so that they can send you back where you belong (p.34).

As Carolyn Steedman's auto/biography of growing up as a working-class girl reveals, cleanliness was of more value than other social attributes such as strength or honesty. In actuality, the imagined whiteness of skin pigmentation could be used as an indicator of social class background and moral constitution. Moreover, having a mother who was deemed 'unclean' was a social stigma that could tarnish your own reputation and come to 'send you back where you belong'. Appropriately enough, resistance to the 'new woman'<sup>15</sup> was couched in terms of 'race suicide' (Harris, 1994). Consequently, being 'dirty' had sexual overtones that interconnected with ideas concerning bourgeois morality; such symbols were used to distinguish working

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<sup>15</sup> The concept of the New Woman arose at the turn of the century and became the defining image of the socially liberated woman during the first wave of feminism.



women from wealthy 'ladies of leisure', deemed the 'fairer' sex. As such, the notion of what constituted 'dirt' was spliced across axes of race, class and gender.

In keeping with this argument, some readers may further recall the famous encounter between Henry Mayhew and an eight-year-old watercress girl during which the writer was left totally perplexed by the vendor's matter-of-fact attitude to street-life. At the close Mayhew reflects how the child was no longer an innocent and almost an adult. This spatial and social delineation between pure/impure, child/adult, white/black so on and so forth, heightened the claims of the bourgeoisie to categories of meaning related to that of being innocent, white, rural or suburban dwellers and encouraged the relegation of working-class peoples to those of urban, dirt-ridden, unclean hoards. In *The Sphinx in the City* Elizabeth Wilson (1991) has pointed to the role of female sexuality as a gauge for measuring civilisation in Victorian Britain. She claims an underlying fear existed amongst middle-class men that bourgeois women could be tainted by the depravity of the city - dirt, syphilis and prostitution - by way of a 'moral miasma' (p39). By simply being part of city-life, rubbing shoulders with different social groups and inhaling the smells of the polluted environment, it was felt that the notion of white womanhood would in itself come to be devalued. However, for women of the British working class such as Carolyn Steedman's mother, the claim to bodily cleanliness was always in danger of being undercut, most notably, through the imperious scrutiny of a masculine, bourgeois gaze.

Furthermore, notions of femininity and whiteness could also be fractured across religious and ethnic lines. In her autobiography of growing up Jewish in the North East of England from the 1920s, Millie Donbrow (1988[1972]) recalls how the landscape of Jewish girlhood was carefully cultivated:

A Jew, I had been told, was like a piece of white satin on which any stain would show up more markedly than on a piece of dark material. My mother warned me to listen carefully to my teachers

and to obey them implicitly. If I behaved badly I would spoil that beautiful piece of white satin (p.24).

At the same time, to those outside the Jewish community, these religious and ethnic groups were invariably beyond the pale. For example, Robert Roberts writes of female spinners in the Salford textile industry who had less social standing because the trade contained a strong Irish Catholic element. Moreover, wages were lower than that of other weavers and the employees would often dirty themselves:

... because of the heat and slippery floors women worked barefoot, dressed in little more than calico shifts. These garments, the respectable believed, induced in female spinners a certain moral carelessness. They came home, too, covered in dust and fluff; all things which combined to depress their social prestige (1987:20).

In this reading ethnicity, gender, class and dress could interact in such a manner as to discursively produce a subject that embodied 'moral carelessness'. This served to further degrade any modicum of whiteness accorded to sections of labouring women who included spinners, watercress girls, washerwomen, ward-maids and dustwomen alike.

A further instance of the deployment of a racialised and gendered class code can be found in Liz Stanley's (1992) auto/biographical discussion, through a close reading of their diaries, of the relations of power between the Victorians Hannah Cullwick and Arthur Munby. Although each of the protagonists would today be depicted as 'white', there is more than a sense that the lower working-class servant Cullwick occupies a different ethnic category than the upper-class male Munby. Here, a debauched, working-class womanhood is juxtaposed with a pristine, bourgeois manhood (see fig. 1). Stanley goes on to argue that the relationship between Cullwick and Munby comprised a 'series of dichotomies [that] was begun by male/female and expanded to overlay upper/lower, clean/dirty, white/black, Munby-Massa/Hannah



*Fig.1: Watercolour sketch by A.J. Munby of himself with a colliery girl at Rose Bridge Pits, Wigan.*

slave' (p.166). In this formulation, Cullwick as a lower working-class woman is subordinated to the position of a 'dirty, black slave', engaged in a complex negotiation of power with her 'clean, white Massa'. Indeed, Stanley points to the role of 'dirt' and 'disfigurement' as a means of establishing boundaries between middle- and working-class people in Victorian society. She suggests that Munby had a fetish for 'spotting' disfigured dustwomen and by recording their activities he supplemented his 'collection' of the Other. This causes Stanley to contemplate whether, 'Perhaps for Munby *all* working class women were disfigured' (p.173). The notion of working-class bodies as diseased and deformed remained a potent metaphor in Victorian England for gauging the harsher effects of industrialisation and the moral constitution of the labouring classes.

The concept of cleanliness as an indicator of a superior, white, social class status was sustained throughout the inter-war period. The historian Eric Hobsbawm (1982[1968]) reminds us that because a number of white-collar workers in fact earned no more than the aristocracy of manual labour they were anxious to maintain a higher cultural status. Consequently this 'sullen army of the suburbs' (p.277) he describes, were keen to deploy what markers they could to distinguish themselves from the 'Great Unwashed'. A convenient means of depreciating the social status of urban toilers was to inflict a binary of clean/dirty. Thus, Hobsbawm expresses how this lower middle class stratum were effectively panicked by 'the thought that council houses might provide the workers with water-closets' (ibid.) and that this could further narrow the band between bordering social class groups. As we have seen, the connotations of cleanliness reached beyond the mere idea of hygiene to encompass social standing and sexual morality. Such conceptions of who was clean and who was dirty were unashamedly racialised as we have already seen. Thus, Roberts (1987) recalls having a friend whose white mother was said to be of low repute, subsequently she was known locally as the 'She Nigger' (p.27). In this way the stigma of once being a prostitute could forever taint the identities of women; it was as indelible as having black skin. In this reading a 'disreputable' white woman could be classified as a 'nigger' as the contours of race, gender and sexuality intertwined. That the racist term 'nigger' should require a feminine prefix further illustrates the masculine

associations attributed to this rudimentary form. In contemporary British society we need look no further than insular descriptions of international cuisine as ‘foreign muck’, or indeed foreigners themselves as ‘dirty’ to appreciate how the symbolic passage towards whiteness can be accomplished through metaphors of cleanliness.

As we have seen, the discursive construction of the working class body as ‘unclean’ and ‘animalistic’ is prominent throughout urban literature. This underlying belief that working-class women and men were not white could result in further discourses of delineation. For example when it came to courtship practices amongst young people in working-class communities a frequent custom in the 1920s was said to be that of the ‘monkey parade’ or ‘monkey run’ (Davies, 1992; Martin, 1981). The monkey parade, as it was most popularly known, was a form of promenading in which participants operating in small groups or pairs would dress up in fashionable clothes in the hope that they would be able to pick-up or ‘click’ with members of the opposite sex. Unlike dance halls, restaurants or pubs, the monkey parade offered a cheap leisure alternative when it came to working class courtship rituals. However, as the name suggests, the practice tended to be frowned upon by the elder generation, the police and those who wished to set a sterner example of ‘respectability’. Accordingly, we are led to believe that ‘Middle-class commentators found the term offensive’ (Davies 1992:103-104) but believed the practice to be aptly named. Instead, a primary means by which ‘respectable’ working class citizens could ‘whiten’ their status was through the adoption of bourgeois values: thrift, cleanliness, deferred gratification and a belief in the Protestant work-ethic. In contrast, for the now-established sections of the middle classes whiteness was to become a normative experience whose power lay in the ‘fact’ that it was taken-for-granted.

### *‘Becoming white’: The making of a white nation*

The previous sections have shown how in the British context whiteness, far from being an inherent physiological phenomenon, was socially constituted. The importance of spatial factors, dress habits, social-class background, religion, ethnicity and gender were demonstrated when each of these elements synthesised to shape the

meaning of whiteness in people's lives. Given the extent to which the working classes have been socially excluded from whiteness, it may seem strange to consider that East End folk, for example, who were hitherto derided as a race apart, are now seen to be 'salt of the earth' representatives of white Anglo-ethnicity. In view of this legacy it seems all the more surprising to find that in recent times sections of the British working class have been utilising a 'Rights for Whites' discourse when it comes to the state provision of housing, employment and health services. The election of a British National Party candidate Dereck Beacon in a Millwall by-election on September 16th, 1993 under a mantra of 'white rights' is evidence of this appeal to white status. The claims to 'White Power' offered by British far-Right parties have been especially aimed at both the unemployed and lower echelons of the labouring classes, now magically included under the label 'white'. But it is only in more recent times that these social groups have come to understand themselves as white as the evidence clearly shows. Historically speaking, the meaning of whiteness has been culturally specific, altering over place and time. As such, whiteness has not always been equated with domination as CLR James explains:

... historically it is pretty well proved now that the ancient Greeks and Romans knew nothing about race. They had another standard - civilised and barbarian - and you could have a white skin and be a barbarian and you could be black and civilised (cited in Alexander, 1987:5)

In this way the semiotic meanings that associate blackness with primitive nature and counterpoise this with an understanding of whiteness as the guiding light of civilisation, have emphatically been socially constructed.

And yet more recently, as Vron Ware's (1996) account of Beacon's polling success<sup>16</sup> on the Isle of Dogs suggests, it would appear that the British working classes have 'become' white. Given the national and regional splits that have fractured

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<sup>16</sup> While this success was short lived, it marks a sorry chapter in the history of British 'race relations'.

‘Britishness’, not least the claims to Geordie, Scottish, Welsh, Scouse, Irish and Cockney identities, the pull of whiteness has remained a frighteningly effective point of coalition. Although black people have had a longstanding presence in Britain, the arrival of 492 Jamaicans in 1948 from the ship the *Empire Windrush* marked a turning point in the nation’s history. By the end of the 1950s racial intolerance in the East End had noticeably shifted from the Jews, Irish and East Europeans to black settlers who were keenly encouraged to collaborate in Britain’s post-war reconstruction process. As the title of Sheila Patterson's (1965[1963]) study shows these early workers, and later settlers, were deemed *Dark Strangers*. The later influx of people from the Indian sub-continent and East Asia was greeted with equal levels of hostility from a number of working-class ethnic communities who had striven to distinguish themselves as ‘white’. Correspondingly, the bodies of Britain’s newly arrived ‘dark strangers’ were treated as symbolic blackboards upon which the imagined traces of whiteness, Englishness and national identity could now be most evidently chalked.

In the post-war years it was through a symbolic black body that the British working class could most convincingly construe themselves as white. It was what blackness stood for in the imperial, class-conscious imagination that so terrorised the native populace. Accordingly, the celebrated journalist Colin MacInnes in his street-life study of London in 1957 chose to entitle his fictional work *City of Spades*. Even so, the newly arrived black immigrants were able to make the same types of comparisons between East-End London and Africa as that made a few decades previously by late-Victorians and Edwardians. Hence, the lead black character Johnny Fortune reflects, ‘This Immigration Road is quite the queen of squalor. And though back home we have our ruined streets, they haven’t the scraped grimness of this East End thoroughfare’ (1993:113-114). Moreover, distinctions between East and West London remained. We are informed that a Negro in the East End is a ‘bad sign’ because, ‘There’s East End Spades and West End Spades. West End are perhaps wickeder, but more prosperous and reliable’ (p.111). Andrew Davies (1992) in a study of post-war working-class culture in Salford and Manchester also refers to a district near Ordsall known as “‘Little Africa”, on account of a handful of seamen and Maltese café

owners who had settled there' (p.115). In a study of London Teddy boys in the early 1960s T.R. Fyvel (1964[1961]) illustrates the subculture's hostility towards 'Spades' and 'Cyps' (Greek Cypriots). The mutability of whiteness is seen when the author notes, 'the Teds look down on the Cypriots as foreigners not regarded as quite "white"' (p.100). Such testimonies reveal how visible minorities were located as Other to the nation and excluded from the social category 'white'.

Most noticeably the influx of peoples from the New Commonwealth countries was now used to construct a powerful assumption, the traces of which remain with us today: that to be British is above all to be white. As Paul Gilroy (1995) has shown, for too long Britishness and blackness have appeared mutually incompatible<sup>17</sup>. But the hostility displayed to blacks did not mean that other forms of racism had declined or that all segments of the British working class were equally embraced as 'white' as we shall go on to find (Chapter 7). Indeed, Hobsbawm reflects that the reign of Elizabeth II has seen sharper degrees of difference between the unskilled or unqualified and the rest of British society. He claims that by now 'the clean-handed worker was no longer a freak, or a simple extension of "management", but a large part of the labour force' (1982:289). This may further explain the mobilisation of large fractions of the working class as 'white'. Moreover, the 'dark strangers' who had arrived on English shores in numbers after the Second World War were soon to be allotted their respective positions as Britain's new and most troublesome 'alien breed'. This situation was consolidated as these post-war migrants were forced to live in overcrowded, inner city rented properties and carry out the menial jobs rejected by white working-class subjects. At the time of writing black British people can no longer to be regarded as foreigners from a distant land, the 'dark strangers' Sheila Patterson had once recorded. It is these most recent post-imperial complexities that this thesis will centre on, through a focus on the contemporary cultural identities of British youth.

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<sup>17</sup> This is historically different to the 'melting pot' thesis put forward in the US, which in actuality encourages 'new' immigrants to shed their culture and take on the mantle of Americanism. Even so, at its inception the melting pot did not extend to certain groups including African-Americans.



This preliminary chapter has considered the particularity of the social and historical formation of whiteness in industrial Britain. Through an examination of historical documents, biographies, urban reports and popular novels of the period, a number of insights concerning the perceptions of early city-life can be made. Evidently, the English inner city was understood to be a dark and dangerous place, likened to the African jungle. The uncertainty that greeted social change and the rapid expansion of cities was in turn to encourage perceptions of the countryside as the repository for the constitution of white, English identities. An underlying fear remained that the lower echelons of society would gradually sap the vitality of 'English stock'. This corresponded with a sense that the stalwart English character was rapidly degenerating in the urban environment. Notably, the spread of urbanisation led to a series of spatial demarcations between town and country, inner city and periphery, and in the case of places like Leeds and London, between a West and East End. Consequently, the urban poor were assigned zones in the city that removed them from much day-to-day contact with the bourgeoisie. However, for many middle-class social commentators of the period the urban experience, not unlike that of working-class bodies, was subconsciously tinged with the *frisson* of pleasure and danger. This fear and attraction can be found in the simultaneous demands to 'deodorise' the masses and the boastful vigour with these writers proclaimed to have 'penetrated' the deepest, innermost parts of the city. The 'discovery' of poorer sections of the city was thereby akin to the heroic, masculine narratives of Empire attributed to explorers of the time.

## Conclusion

At the time of writing, the story of how the British working class became white is little known. Hopefully this chapter will go some way to changing this, though more sustained research is required than space allows here. Nevertheless, the chapter demonstrates the 'making' of whiteness in industrial Britain and in particular draws attention to the shifting morphology of the identity 'white'. This has revealed the contingency of whiteness and exposed how certain groups were relegated from the category 'white', while others could take up the identity. Significantly, whiteness was intersected by the configurations of social class, ethnicity, gender and geography -

issues that we will return to in the subsequent empirical analysis. In essence, the working-classes were excluded in all but their entirety from whiteness. Thus, labouring women - washerwomen, maids, prostitutes, dustwomen and market vendors - were all marginalised from the sacred echelons of whiteness. So too were a number of 'white' migrants on account of their religious and/or ethnic backgrounds, including Jews, Irish-Catholics, Polish and Russian peoples. Moreover, individual fractions of the working class - manual labourers, urban dwellers, the 'residuum', the undernourished, the uneducated, the disabled, the poverty-stricken and the socially and economically impoverished - were all tainted with the knowledge that in the final analysis of the bourgeoisie they were not yet white.

The urban studies discussed in this opening chapter provide us, then, with a remarkable insight into early ethnographies and social observations of people and places. While this thesis grows out of this tradition there remain some significant differences. The previous studies were conducted by white, male, middle-class voyeurs and were so rudely enacted upon the bodies of working-class people and their neighbourhoods. My research departs from this obsession with the Other by focusing most directly upon whiteness, so at least in part turning the dreaded ethnographic gaze back upon the dominant ethnic majority. Furthermore, it focuses on the daily lives of young people and accords a degree of sensitivity to their social experiences. As such, the analysis is derived less from cursory social observations and more from the process of inhabiting shared spaces, spending time conversing with and listening to young people. In this respect there is a shift in emphasis from the voices of middle-class spectators to the lived experiences of working-class youth. However, as we shall discover in Chapter 3 bourgeois attitudes to working class subjects - most especially youth - remain noticeably austere.

In the absence of British accounts of white identity there have recently been a number of studies that have begun to explore the development of whiteness in the US. While I have been at pains to stress the social and historical specificity of the English imperial context, there remains much that British scholars can learn from the recent

transatlantic work on whiteness. I will now turn my attention to this current body of literature to identify the key theoretical positions that are emerging in the field. The aim in this chapter will be to provide an overview of the literature on whiteness that can be paradigmatically organised to ascertain the theoretical position and epistemological status of this on-going research. In particular, I identify three frameworks for the study of whiteness that include materialistic, deconstructionist and psychoanalytic repertoires. Each of these paradigms offer critical methods for a thorough examination of whiteness and white identity. At the same time, an examination of the US hegemony over debates on whiteness may leave us better placed to ascertain the originality of this thesis with its focus on youthful white, English ethnicities.

**Frameworks for Whiteness:  
Materialist, Deconstructionist and Psychoanalytical  
Paradigms**

**Chapter 2**

## Introduction

While research into race and ethnicity has continued apace, these studies for the large part have concerned themselves with the ethnicity of minority groups. An unintentional consequence of this has been the over-bearing scrutiny placed on the racial identities of visible minorities at the expense of their white counterparts. As such, very little is known about the ethnicities of white youth and how whiteness impacts upon their lives. And yet, as we shall go on to discover, the processes of racialisation which come to silently mark the identities of white youth are no less meaningful than those which shape the lives of young black people. Moreover, white youth may come to occupy a privileged place in the broader scheme of race relations, this does not detract from the structural specificity of their ethnic location. Subsequently, the ability of whiteness to absent itself from identity debates is a source of its privilege and power. This has allowed whiteness to appear transparent, as if representing an entirely neutral perspective. Thus, social groups have been able to collectively mobilise around subordinate identities (working class, feminist, gay and lesbian) without ever acknowledging their dominant status in race relations. This blind-spot has exacerbated the marginal position of visible minorities and has left the issue of whiteness and white identity unanswered. As we shall find, the first few faltering steps have been taken by way of addressing this imbalance.

At the time when I began this thesis on white cultural identity the available literature in the area could, at best, be described as embryonic. Since then, there has been something of a 'turn' to whiteness within radical strands of the social sciences. This has spawned a flurry of 'Readers' and edited collections on the subject matter, including the collection of essays in *Off-White* (Fine *et.al.*, 1997), the interdisciplinary text *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (Hill, 1997), Ruth Frankenberg's (1997) edited volume *Displacing Whiteness*, and a law compilation called *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). There is also an edited collection which studies white identity and language entitled, *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity* (Nakayama & Martin, 1999). An edited collection of essays by black writers on what it means to be white provides an alternative perspective on the subject that demonstrates that the discussion of whiteness, at least

among minority groups, is nothing new (Roediger, 1998)<sup>18</sup>. Alongside this body of work have arisen a clutch of introspective studies, drawing on auto/biographical material, story-telling and anecdotal evidence, including the volume *Names We Call Home* (Thompson & Tyagi, 1996) and Jane Lazarre's memoir of a white mother with black sons, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*. A special issue of the international journal *Transition* (1999) simply entitled 'The White Issue' is further testimony towards what is increasingly becoming a burgeoning area of academic enquiry.

Somewhat belatedly American writers have realised the shortcomings of deconstructing blackness at the expense of leaving white normalcy intact. However, with a few notable exceptions the quality of written material in the 'Readers' and auto/biographical studies is somewhat patchy and disappointing, having all the hallmarks of being hurriedly thrown together in an attempt to colonise a potential, growing area of interest. The irony of this situation has been missed by the collective authors of *Off White* who show concern that 'whiteness could surface as the new intellectual fetish', and then declare that their own volume 'should be the last book on whiteness' (Fine *et.al.*, 1997:xii). Demanding the final word on the subject of whiteness - which effectively silences others while claiming to represent them - can resonate with the echo of imperial authority. When such issues of censorship arise the inevitable question remains, just whose version of whiteness is being legitimated?

It is not my aim in this chapter to take the reader through a detour of every written assignment on whiteness, though inevitably I shall refer to this literature throughout the course of this thesis. Here I shall concentrate on three key frameworks of investigation - materialism, deconstructionism and psychoanalysis - as these paradigms have been highly influential in shaping debates on whiteness and white ethnicities to date. Moreover, the approaches have furnished me with a 'map of meaning' through which I have been able to conduct my own research on the cultural identities of young people. As such, I have taken inspiration from each of these approaches, as well as an established literature on black British history. Furthermore, my study on white racial identities has been in dialogue with the extensive writings on youth subculture and ethnicity, outlined in Chapter 4. With this in mind, I have set

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<sup>18</sup> The life-history narratives in Chapter 10 would also support the claim that minority peoples can have a sharper insight into the workings of whiteness in contemporary British society.

out to provide a thorough empirical analysis related to the meaning of whiteness amongst British youth.

Firstly, I will begin by discussing materialist approaches to whiteness where the focus is firmly on labour histories and racialised politics in the work place. The emphasis here is strictly revolutionary and concerned with nothing less than the ‘abolition’ of whiteness. However, a diversity of materialist texts can be found ranging from deterministic Marxist analyses through to more sophisticated and nuanced approaches of social and political economy. My own work is most certainly influenced by the latter perspective. Next, I will move on to consider the deconstructive paradigm from which a number of feminist studies, and those concerned with the politics of representation, have arisen. These small-scale studies focus on ‘deconstruction’ and draw attention to the contingent constitution of whiteness to show how the category ‘white’ is interlaced, not least by the dynamics of gender. Finally, I will discuss an eclectic set of psychoanalytic research that argues for the centrality of the unconscious in theories of cultural identity. This approach stresses the importance of recognising that white identities are both externally and internally constituted, in other words, whiteness has a psychic dimension that requires deeper understanding.

### **‘Abolishing Whiteness’: Materialist Analyses and the New Labour Historians**

Marxist scholars and new labour historians have a longstanding interest in comprehending how the American labour force has come to be divided across lines of ethnic allegiance. More recently, a number of these writers have turned their attention towards attacking the remaining vestiges of white privilege. This cluster of authors are united by one common cause – the abolition of whiteness – a theme that echoes the anti-slavery movement. We shall later return to the issue of abolishing whiteness.

The paradox of racism is all the more stark in the US context where historically it has often been ‘old’ immigrants from Northern and Western Europe who were using their new-found WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) status as ‘authentic’ Americans<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This is especially paradoxical given the indigenous histories of native American Indians.

to discriminate against Irish-Catholic communities and the later 'new' immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. Moreover, the second wave of migrants, who brought with them new cultural and religious customs have at times also distinguished themselves as 'whiter' than their Mexican, Latino and African-American counterparts. Many of the new labour historians have been particularly attentive to the history of Irish-Americans, as many of these immigrants were recognised to be initially victims then later perpetrators of racist abuse (Ignatiev, 1995; Roediger, 1992, 1994). It is this nebulous configuration of 'white' coalition and fragmentation that concerns many socialist writers whom are now beginning to grapple with the vexed question of race, nationhood and whiteness.

By far the most expansive and theoretically astute work to emerge on the subject of whiteness has come from the American labour historian David Roediger. In keeping with other Marxist writers Roediger has applied historical methods to interpret the 'making' of whiteness in US society amongst the labouring classes. Thus, in *The Wages of Whiteness* David Roediger (1992) argues that the white working class were made to feel inherently superior to immigrants entering America, on the basis of their assumed whiteness. As the title of the book suggests, whiteness became a form of currency which, through its association with privilege, could be used to 'pay off' white working-class employees and so compensate for low wages and a broader economic exploitation. Here, the bourgeois encoding of colour is both a way of consolidating power relations amongst a middle-class elite while generating rifts among the proletariat struggling towards an ever-retreating American Dream. In this sense capital is not the only form of currency that alienates workers from one another, but whiteness itself carries exchange value.

Roediger aims to produce an analysis that is attentive to the process of racism as well as to the dynamics of social class. He remarks how 'no answer to the "white problem" can ignore the explanatory power of historical materialism, but neither does Marxism as presently theorised, consistently help us focus on the central issue of why so many workers define themselves as white' (1992:6). Nevertheless, Roediger's extensive research maintains an unflagging commitment to Marxism which is also carried forward in his second, equally compelling book, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*:



To the extent that we argue that whiteness and various kinds of 'white ethnicity' are reactions to alienation ... an emphasis on class can be made. We may emphasise ... the role of powerlessness at work in opening people to settling for the fiction that they are 'white workers' ... (1994:8).

In this way, occupying the identity of a 'white worker' may be a strategy of survival that displaces the anxieties and alienation felt through capitalism. The notion that individuals settle for a 'fiction' is in keeping with the familiar Marxist concept of 'false consciousness', where working-class individuals are acting against their supposed better collective interests, which have yet to be realised. For Roediger, 'participation in authentic struggles against oppression and powerlessness could be a useful antidote to whiteness' (1994:9). Although he writes from a class-conscious standpoint of historical materialism, Roediger is at pains to avoid the pitfalls of 'vulgar Marxism' that assert that racism is a mere 'epiphenomenon' of the economic base, experienced only through class relations. He is careful not to dismiss racism as residing within the 'superstructure' and goes as far to claim that such reductionism is 'damaging' (1994:8)<sup>20</sup>. Rather, as we have seen, Roediger treats whiteness itself an economic currency/wage, an organising principle in American society. As his fellow labour historian Theodore Allen has claimed, whiteness is not a peripheral component of the US past, but 'the overriding jetstream that has governed the flow of American history' (1994:22).

Some of the most compelling moments in Roediger's work come as he skilfully moves between macro-economic and micro-economic perspectives. At these points there is an appreciation of how different forms of dominance and subordination are spoken through one another. An example of this complex articulation occurs when Roediger discusses how the term 'white man' became not just a racial category but an identity forged through gendered discourses related to masculinity. He explains how whiteness as a social construct could be a flexible, mutable term.

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<sup>20</sup> According to conventional Marxist theory the material economic base (in this case capitalism) 'determines' the wider societal 'superstructure' (law, religion, politics, education etc.).

White male workers could turn out not to have 'any manhood', if they 'turned nigger' by 'blackening themselves' as scabs. Conversely, class-conscious Black workers could ... prove that 'They are white men' ... white skilled workers associated lack of manliness at work with slavery and slavery with race ... Whiteness, maleness and pride in craft joined in the fashioning of an identity (Roediger, 1994:162).

As the passage implies a working-class 'protest' masculinity existed for those that came out in support of strikes, a resistance which Roediger emphasises as traversing ethnic assumptions so much so, that class-conscious black workers could prove themselves 'white men' and thereby recoup racial and gendered credentials. For Roediger the location of masculine identities through labour positions is central, where white strike-breakers could 'turn nigger' by occupying the feminised, racialised identity of 'scab'. This position is itself located within the structure of slavery, where the slave is unequivocally feminised through his subordinate relationship with his master. Being a slave or 'scab' is located as an emasculated identity, equated with passivity and feminine subjectivity. This identification also has the effect of celebrating working class male resistance through the construction of a hard 'rebel' masculinity. This suggests that racial boundaries can be structured through the dynamics of masculinity, social class and labour. As such, the interrelationships between black and white labourers is not purely antagonistic, shifting alliances could traverse racism at one level, while dividing the work force across alternative lines of differentiation at another.

Although the more sophisticated materialists like Roediger point to the way gender, race and class intermesh, labour remains the key site upon which these contradictions are played out. Hence, it is the masculine world of the workplace that has been the focus of investigation in many of these studies. In this sense, we know far less about how these dynamics are interwoven into leisure spaces, family life, schooling or sexual relations for example. By focusing solely on a labour context there remains the question, what happens to the processes described by labour historians when other contexts and situations are accounted for? In other words, to what extent can the analysis of racial identities fashioned in the workplace translate into other life spheres? Thus, the 'nigger' who is able to 'turn white' in a momentary alliance against capitalist employers and 'scabs', may not be able to maintain this privilege on the street and within different social strata. As the British writer Phil Cohen points

out, 'Racialised discourses are always in context ... at work or on the streets; at one neighbourhood or another. These different sites can yield complex and shifting alliances and points of tension' (1993:27). The particular relations of whiteness that the new labour historians identify should then be recognised as contextually contingent (i.e. related to the sites where these processes occur) and culturally specific (i.e. they bear a particular relation to the history of American slavery).

By focusing only on manual labour relations the significance of women and children goes unmentioned. The absence of an analysis of the family has further led to the invisibility of youthful perspectives as illustrated within this thesis. This seems all the more striking when we consider that white working class masculinities may also be consolidated through family life, domestic roles, leisure activities and parenting. Moreover, any study into the (re)production of whiteness will be all the narrower for its absence of a consideration of 'the family'. Certainly in my own research I found that the notion of sexual choice, and how this was carefully regulated, alluded to the ways young people's future horizons could be marked by the perseverance of whiteness (Chapter 5, 7). That the making of the American working class seems to occur in the workplace, conceals the hidden history that whiteness is also reliant upon the nexus of the family unit. The labour emphasis undervalues the culture of the home, wider social activities and the heterosexual relations that are foreground in some of the recent feminist writings on whiteness we will soon consider. Thus, domestic work, schooling and consumption are just some of the neglected sites for the production of identity in Marxist writing on whiteness to date. This absence was particularly noticeable in my investigations of young people's social worlds where the transition into the workplace had yet to be accomplished. Moreover, the research suggested a need to be attentive to the interconnectedness of neighbourhood, schooling and local environments.

Along with the work of David Roediger, labour historiography has been supplemented by a radical splinter group of writers working for the journal *Race Traitor*. In keeping with Roediger's call for the 'abolition of whiteness' the journal encourages whites to become 'race traitors' and relinquish whiteness. The motto is plain enough, and etched into every edition, 'Treason to whiteness is loyalty for humanity'. The editorial go on to explain: '*Race Traitor* aims to abolish the white

club, to break it apart, to explode it ... to blow apart the social formation known as the white race, so that no one is "white"' (Garvey & Ignatiev, 1997:347-348)<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, the *Race Traitor* journal contains numerous accounts of people who have individually or collectively broken with white identification: prisoners who 'no longer saw anything in common with the Warden, not even 'whiteness'' (Ervin, 1994:16), female students who discovered 'the tremendous power of crossover culture to undermine both white solidarity and male authority' (Free To Be Me, 1994:33) and Joel Gilbert's fascinating account of moving from a fascist identity to a state where he felt, 'most of the whiteness I grew up with has washed away' (1994:10).

The authors listed in this section make their collective aim clear, whiteness must be 'abolished', 'crossed over' or 'washed away'. In their debates with social constructionists *Race Traitor* maintain that the opposite of 'construction' is not 'deconstruction' but 'destruction'. This forms a glaring example of the revolutionary tendencies of Marxist agents and their bid to overthrow white hegemony. Similarly, Roediger indicates that, 'Powerful as it is, the insight that race is socially constructed does not magically inform us with strategies for overcoming race-class oppression' (1994:5). For these radical writers, as long as there is a 'white race' by which individuals can identify themselves, racial oppression will prevail.

So how, we may ask, can whiteness be abolished? One of the ways in which this can be achieved is by whites becoming 'race traitors': embracing black culture, and eventually forgoing whiteness through self-identifying as black. Popular culture is frequently the playground for 'race traitors' to experiment with black culture and in some cases they may undergo radical transformation in their perceived ethnic identities. Thus, David Roediger has expressed how hip-hop music in the States, which is mainly bought by middle-class white suburban youth, 'offers an explicit, often harsh critique of whiteness' (1994:16). Meanwhile, an article entitled 'Crossover Dreams' in *Race Traitor* the editors beckon today's abolitionists to take the "'exceptional white" - the race traitor - from cult to mainstream' (Rubio, 1996, 161). The strategic subversion of the 'exceptional white' and some of the drawbacks entailed when enacted this subjectivity are discussed in a later chapter on new

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<sup>21</sup> In his polemic edition *Look Out Whitey!* (1970:140) Julius Lester makes a point of expressing that 'Black power is not anti-white people, but is anti anything and everything that serves to oppress'.

ethnicities (Chapter 9). The potential of black culture to subvert whiteness is also discussed by the British writer Simon Jones (1988) as we shall go on to find in Chapter 4. In this way, the hybrid exchanges between different cultures has been celebrated by cultural critics as opening up new sites of possibility that culminate in a potential, radical 'third space' (Bhabha, 1990). Here, dominant cultures are themselves transformed in their complex encounters with the colonial Other.

However, further investigation reveals that where young people may readily engage with a particular style of black culture (usually an Afro-American version of 'cool'), they may retain disparaging feelings towards other representations of blackness (for example those found in Asian or Chinese cultures). As the abolitionist writers are no doubt aware, the scenario of white folk 'crossing over' into blackness is littered with tyrannical tales of exploitation, appropriation and cultural theft. As we shall discover in the subsequent chapters (Chapters 4, 5), youth subcultures such as the Skinheads have a long-established history of celebrating aspects of black culture while maintaining a white racist hostility towards black people. These examples suggest that the debunking of whiteness in one situation, does not go hand in hand with the repudiation of white identity in another. For example, Chapter 9 studies the practices of a collection of so-called 'race traitors', wannabes and B-Boyz. Members immersed themselves in the full blazonary of black style, yet, in so doing, invoked racialised codes of black hyper-masculinity that tended to fetishize the black body

Moreover, while young people may assimilate aspects of black culture in order to fill a void, this leaves the issue of white ethnicity untouched. As *Race Traitor* appreciate, to claim that whiteness is merely a lack, an absence or an empty category, says more about the cultural ascription given to whiteness than it does about white racial identities themselves. However, the question of how can we persuade individuals to destroy something that is felt not to exist in the first place still remains. Instead, my research with young people indicates that while many have some sense of how racism and ethnicity impinge upon the lives of black people, very little is known about how these issues affect the subjectivities of white youth. Rather than advocating a politics of disassociation, in contrast, I am arguing for a critical engagement with whiteness and white racial identity. The empirical evidence suggests that British young people need to have 'felt' investments in challenging whiteness beyond the superficial

experimentation of adolescent ‘cross-over’. A further question that arose can be said to offer an implicit critique of abolitionist theories. What incentives are there for white working-class youth, with few material advantages themselves, to relinquish whiteness? In other words, aside from a moral discourse of social justice *why should* young people forego white-skin privilege? These issues are addressed in Chapter 7 when the perspectives of the ethnic majority are openly addressed. Either way, such unwritten investments in whiteness may underscore the project of the new abolitionists, especially when the meaning of whiteness is so little understood.

Of the materialist writers discussed in this section, I have focused predominantly on the texts of David Roediger as his remain the most fluent and theoretically conscious work in the area. While the work of Theodore Allen, Noel Ignatiev and the contributors to *Race Traitor* are less subtle their studies nevertheless represent a united ‘abolitionist’ approach to whiteness. Moreover, the explanatory power of historical materialism means the literature in this paradigm is perhaps the most compelling. As Alastair Bonnet (1996:150) has remarked in a critique of Marxist universalism, ‘The challenge for this group of writers ... is either to broaden their analysis *without losing its clarity* or to reflexively acknowledge and monitor the fact that they are engaged in abstracting particular factors from a much more complex set of social processes’ [original emphasis]. As such, there remains scope for the development of materialist analyses. Certainly, the influence of labour history upon the accompanying styles of whiteness in the English context became an integral unit of analysis in this thesis (Chapter 5, 7), demonstrating the significance of social class to the production of white identities. Moreover, the materialist framework drew my attention towards the intra-class distinctions of whiteness discussed in Chapter 8 by way of the subcultures of the ‘Real Geordies’ and the ‘Charver Kids’. Overall, I found materialist approaches amongst the most influential when conducting research on whiteness and remain indebted to this body of work. These perspectives enabled a thorough and historically informed analysis of whiteness to be accomplished.

## **‘Deconstructing Whiteness’: Social Construction, Representation and Feminism**

Within the deconstructionist paradigm we may distinguish a number of thematic trajectories. I shall concern myself with focusing on those features that I have made use of in this thesis. In the deconstructionist framework there is an emphasis on whiteness as a socially constructed phenomenon that may be enacted differently according to context, situation and interpersonal dynamics. Careful attention is paid by these writers to the discursive constitution of whiteness and how white identities are fragmented across lines of gender, age, class and sexuality. The particularity of whiteness is highlighted here, as we gain insight into the complex nuances that come to intersect white ethnicity. Here, there is an acute sensitivity to individual biographies and lived experience, often absent from the broader historical portraits of whiteness. What was particularly useful was the dynamic recognition of the contingency of whiteness and how it was constituted in multiple social contexts including, sexual arenas, the neighbourhood, family life, friendship-groups and educational environments (Jackson, 1998). These studies have exposed the manifold configuration of racial identities and encouraged the deconstruction of monolithic assumptions of whiteness. At the same time, it becomes increasingly difficult to move from the particular to the general, in order to discern some clear findings concerning whiteness. As such, many of the writers have concerned themselves with the ‘meaning’ of whiteness, and have tended to use textual analyses, in-depth interviews or personal biographies to interpret this. While these qualitative methods are of use, I have attempted to create a historically embedded, long-term ethnographic study of whiteness and white racial identity. This goes beyond many of the conventional qualitative research methods I encountered.

Much of the deconstructionist literature has been influenced by post-structuralist and postmodernist theories of identity. This is most evident in many of the recent feminist approaches to whiteness. Thus, in their study of Irish women in Britain, Hickman and Walter remark, ‘It is all too easy for “whiteness” to be equated with a homogenous way of life. What is necessary is research on the deconstruction of “whiteness” (1995:5). Indeed language, or more precisely discourse, has been a focus for many of the deconstructionist analyses of whiteness. For example, in an article that draws influence from discourse analysis, Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek put forward

the case for regarding whiteness as 'a strategic rhetoric' (1995:291-309). They go on to explain: 'we take everyday discourse as a starting point in the process of marking the territory of whiteness and the power relations it generates' (1995:296).

Moreover, other writers have used theories of representation to analyse the visual and cinematic production of whiteness (Dyer, 1993; Pickerill, 1995; Nayak, 1997).

Richard Dyer has developed this approach further in his recent text *White* (1997), using semiotic methods to deconstruct the meaning that whiteness carries in signs and symbols. Dyer explains how whiteness as a discursive construct can be deployed to signify purity, innocence, peace, beauty or Godliness. At the same time, he indicates how whiteness can also be aligned with death, ghosts, the afterlife and heaven, thus maintaining a 'non-corporeal' status. Hence, 'To be seen as white is to have one's corporeality registered, yet true whiteness resides in the non-corporeal ... Whiteness is the sign that makes white people visible as white, while simultaneously signifying the true character of white people, which is invisible' (Dyer, 1997:45). For writers drawing on the deconstructionist paradigm, whiteness can be seen to be discursively constituted in the field of representation through language, symbols and visual text.

### *Feminist Analyses*

The history of the women's movement in the Western world has had to accommodate a series of splits and fissures when it has come to the issue of ethnic minority groups. A starting point for many of the recent writers has been their dissatisfaction with the way the women's movement has responded to debates about racism, and a general failure to acknowledge the overwhelming whiteness of Western feminism as it is currently conceptualised. As the title of Nicole Ward Jouve's book establishes, it may well be the case that the *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue* (1991). Thus, in an early piece (provocatively entitled 'White Woman Listen!') Hazel Carby illustrates how many of the assumptions of feminism are based upon white power



norms<sup>22</sup>. For example, the conventional feminist perspective of 'the family' as a unit of patriarchal oppression was undercut by black feminists who regarded familial networks as a safety zone, a type of cultural support network through which racism can be discussed and collectively resisted. Moreover, for black feminists such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Heidi Mirza, black experiences cannot be simply 'tagged on' to feminism, but should in turn come to reformulate the paradigmatic nature of feminist practice. Hazel Carby explains:

Black women do not want to be grafted onto 'feminism' in a tokenistic manner as colourful diversions to 'real' problems. Feminism has to be transformed if it is to address us. Neither do we wish our words to be misused in generalities as if what each one of us utters represents the total experience of all women.

The frustration that Carby felt with the early women's movement can also be traced in the writings of Ruth Frankenberg and, most noticeably, Vron Ware. The use of the 'personal' and the emphasis on self-reflexivity lend each of these studies the finely-tuned resonance of experience. In keeping with Frankenberg, I also found life-stories were a meaningful way of exploring white identity and so deployed the use of narrative, auto/biography and life-history method to augment the ethnography (see Chapter 10). Here, textual analysis and the use of discourse theory were useful components for 'making sense' of the personal narratives of respondents. Moreover, feminist writers have not simply spoken about the construction of whiteness, but have ventured into the uncertain realm of the experiential, to document the emotional feelings induced through white (dis)identification. These writers have provided explicit autobiographies of their early struggles with feminism and produced studies that explore the peculiarly gendered formation of whiteness.

An important strand of development within the deconstructionist material has been the emergence of feminist writing, concerned with exploring the interstices between gender and white identity. In her historical case studies of female missionaries during

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<sup>22</sup> A vivid example of this occurred when I was one of only two men who attended the Women in Geography Study Group conference in Nottingham, 1996. In between the talks arose a discussion about whether future events should be open to everyone or women-centred. While some feminists were putting the case forward for women-only venues a single black woman in the room stood up and pointed out how she felt a good deal closer to black people regardless of gender than she did to white women on the basis of 'sisterhood'.

the time of the British Raj, entitled *Beyond the Pale*, Vron Ware uses biographical methods to disclose the implicit power of white women<sup>23</sup> in the colonial period. Ware provides memorable case studies of Annette Ackroyd, who went to India to start a school at the invitation of the Brahmo Somaj (an Indian reform movement that wanted to expand education) and Josephine Butler, who campaigned in England on behalf of Indian prostitutes servicing British troops. Each of these women held broadly feminist outlooks: as a single woman Ackroyd was defiant and daring in travelling alone to India, while Butler viewed prostitution as an economic and racialised form of labour that white, British males could exploit. However, Ackroyd and Butler held ambivalent feelings towards Indian women. They also believed in ‘civilising’ the non-Western world through a muscular form of Christianity aimed at uplifting the supposedly primitive cultures. The studies reveal the complex intertwining of whiteness and gender in these women’s lives, which meant that ultimately, they were working within and against the Imperial project. Vron Ware’s research illustrates the importance of feminist studies of whiteness since, ‘the construction of white femininity - that is the different ideas about what it means to be a white female - can play a pivotal role in negotiating and maintaining concepts of racial and cultural difference’ (1993:4). It is these notions of gender as a racialised concept that has influenced the writers within this framework, and enabled me to better think through the complex articulations of ethnicity and gender in young people’s lives.

A strength of the feminist approaches to whiteness has been the exploration of the ways gender, race and sexuality intersect. These dimensions are abundantly evident in Ruth Frankenberg’s (1994) study, *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters*. Frankenberg provides two chapters on race, sex and intimacy showing her conviction that this is a rich source of data that should be discussed. The gender dynamics of white cultural identity, which were often absent in the class-based paradigms create a series of insertions that cut new angles across the blank canvass of whiteness. This is seen in the accounts of Frankenberg’s respondents: ‘Chris early learned the stereotype of the African American man as “rapist”’, while ‘Evelyn described a family friend as having children “sired” by a Black man, clearly reducing the man to an animal’. Such grains of detail were absent from much of the materialist

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<sup>23</sup> For a recent book review of *Beyond the Pale* see the commentary by Sara Mills in *Gender, Place and Culture*, (1996) 3(2), pp.225-244.

analyses that tended to paint with broader, historical brush-strokes. Frankenberg's use of personal stories showed whiteness to be a discourse that operated in women's daily lives, and, as such, could be differently articulated by interviewees.

One of the features of deconstructive writing on whiteness has been the attention paid to the *particularising* aspects of whiteness. These writers have pointed to the significance of context in the formation of white identities and have been at pains to illustrate the contingency of whiteness to explore how it may be situated through specific discourses, locales and temporal zones. Thus, Frankenberg (1993, 1994) is able to write about what she calls the 'social geography of whiteness', to show how neighbourhood factors constitute racial identity<sup>24</sup>. Her research focuses on interviews with 30 adult white women in California, many of whom were self-identified feminists from women's groups. While the particularity of white identity provides a meaningful insight into whiteness, this approach has been a strength and a weakness. It displays the complexity of whiteness but it is exceptionally difficult to make general claims beyond the individuals concerned and thus produce clear strategies of social justice, such as those advocated by the new abolitionists<sup>25</sup>.

But there is a further shortcoming to Frankenberg's work that is more unsettling. She claims that 'there *is* a cultural/racial specificity to white people, at times more obvious to people who are not white than to white individuals' (1994:5[original emphasis]), and yet goes to great lengths to ensure her sample comprises solely of that mysterious category 'white women'. And yet, as Vron Ware's work has shown, 'It is not about *being* a white woman, it is about *being thought of* as a white woman' (1993:xii) that is at the crux of the issue. The desire to hand-pick 'white women' appears all the more perplexing given the title of the book, 'the social construction of whiteness'. If whiteness is socially constructed, as Frankenberg argues, and black people have a

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<sup>24</sup> Other writers have shown how regional factors such as an English 'Northerness' or a suburban American environment can inflect the composition of whiteness in these spaces (Puar, 1995; Twine, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> For example a group called SAW (Students for the Abolition of Whiteness) have emerged in the University of Chicago. There is also the Free To Be Me group in Indiana comprising female school students who have flaunted their 'race traitor' credentials under violent duress from other white peers who construe themselves as the self-appointed guardians of whiteness.

deeper insight into this construction, it remains unclear as to why these individuals were consciously omitted from her study<sup>26</sup>.

Certainly in my own investigations I found that ethnic minority participants had a developed linguistic repertoire with which to discuss whiteness and so puncture the normative category 'white'. bell hooks (1992:165) describes this rich vocabulary as 'special' knowledge gleaned from racial subordination and I have drawn on this from my own life experiences and those shared by black respondents, 'race traitors' and 'mixed-heritage' youth (Chapters 4, 9, 10). Indeed, scholars such as Frankenberg may in turn learn from these dialogues as Kristin Crosland Nebeker recently found: 'As a white person, I feel that I have certainly benefited from the narratives offered in the critical race literature I have read ... [they have] allowed me to recognise the ways in which my lighter skin offers me privileges that I frequently fail to notice' (1998:32). Moreover, gathering a multitude of differently positioned viewpoints on white cultural identity, enabled me to achieve a multi-layered insight into whiteness. As Jasbir Puar has argued, 'oppressed peoples do not necessarily learn dominance. They learn about dominance from a position of inequality' (1995:28). Furthermore, I discovered that the inclusion of the experience of black respondents could at times provide counter-narratives for the interrogative critique of established forms of whiteness.

A further point needs to be made about black people's relationship with white identity - they too can invest in forms of whiteness. By using the fashionable notion of 'socially construction' but then selecting individual 'white women', there is a danger that Frankenberg could lapse into an essentialist notion of whiteness by viewing the concept as somehow intrinsic to white folk. As France Widdance Twine (1996) has skilfully shown in her study of 'Brown Skinned White Girls' it is not only white people who form attachments to whiteness. The issue of 'black' people self-identifying as 'white' has been most vividly documented in Frantz Fanon's (1952) path-breaking volume, *Black Skins, White Masks*, a text we shall discuss in detail in the following section. What such studies reveal is that whiteness, precisely because it

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<sup>26</sup> The theory-led method of starting with out with a ready made argument (in this case that whiteness is socially constructed) may itself narrow the parameters of the research, and flatten out the opportunity of being 'surprised' or reflexively moving in a different direction.

is socially constituted, can be complexly inhabited across differing ethnic subjectivities.

Further evidence of this can be found in Jasbir Puar's (1995) deconstructive essay in which excerpts from 6 second-generation Sikh women in Northern England (20-33 years) are discussed. Puar claims her respondents were 'resituating discourses of "Whiteness" and "Asianness"' (p.21) through the strategic interplay of their multiple subjectivities. As such, she found that second-generation women could enact an 'oppositionally active whiteness - giving an appearance of conformity while maintaining identity through subversion of dominant white gazes ...'(p.31). This subversion could be performed through dress style, language and humour. Here, the second-generation subject has an intimate knowledge of the dual cultures of the 'host' country and their former parental heritage<sup>27</sup>. This produces what Puar describes as a 'double gaze': 'The double gaze allows for amazing creativity; in its supposed curse it can be a blessing of disguise. Dominant white gazes that see through monolithic eyes have no access to the double gaze and perceive no need for it' (p.48). Moreover, the racial identities of respondents were not completely fixed but rather showed signs of flexibility. Thus, Puar writes about the case of Harpreet, who lives with a white partner, and discusses how 'her battles with her family disrupted her Asian-ness and facilitated rebel and white constructions' (p.46).

While many of the personal autobiographies of women and the film analysis are of interest it is difficult to see how, if at all, these observations can be deployed to challenge whiteness through daily practices. This is a point that the new abolitionists would no doubt wish to make, especially in view of some of the recent academic 'Readers' in the area. Somewhat disconcertingly, there remains a fear that the recent academic flaunting of whiteness within US University Departments could lead to the consolidation of a myopic, power evasive treatment of ethnicity and racism. The outpouring of various white biographies, 'Readers' and study centres may even be in danger of creating an unwarranted disciplinary offshoot, 'White Studies'. According to one broadsheet journalist, David Usborne, the study of whiteness represents a new,

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<sup>27</sup> Debbie Weekes (1997) has written about the ways young, black women can become strategically empowered by visually distancing themselves from whiteness through particular dress style, make-up and haircuts.

sexy academic discipline. He explains, 'Whiteness studies ... is not only here, it is hot. On campuses from Berkeley in California, to the University of Massachusetts and Georgia State in Atlanta, they are flocking to sign on. "They" being mostly young whites' (*Independent on Sunday*, 26/4/98, p.3)<sup>28</sup>. Meanwhile, in another newspaper we are informed that 'Whiteness Studies is the latest fashion to sweep through the corridors of American academia. Ethnic Studies departments all over the country are offering courses; last month the University of California at Berkeley held the first conference on whiteness' (*The Guardian*, The Editor, 27/6/98). The dense language of deconstructionism has also led Marxist critics to comment how the area of whiteness is in danger of becoming 'the new flashy toy in the academic nursery' (Fekete, 1998:102). Thus, while the deconstructionist paradigm has produced some of the most sophisticated and detailed analyses of whiteness, the political clarity and historical maturity of materialist approaches is rarely carried through. Despite these drawbacks, I am indebted to the deconstructionist paradigm for the attention to personal experience, gender relations and situational context.

### **'Black Skin/White Masks': Psychoanalysis, Fantasy and the Unconscious**

While the materialist and deconstructionist frameworks provide the most recognisable approaches to whiteness a third repertoire, psychoanalysis, has further influenced my thinking and writing in the area. The strengths of this paradigm lie in the ability to recognise that whiteness and white identity are both externally and internally constituted. At present one cannot write of the psychoanalytical study of whiteness as forming a coherent body of literature, though there are some influential resources I would like to draw attention to. Although the thesis is not primarily a psychoanalytical study of ethnic identities, I have engaged *strategically* with some of the ideas raised in the paradigm. As such, the psychic formation of whiteness remains every bit as significant<sup>as</sup> its outward manifestation.

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<sup>28</sup> At present, however, there is no complete degree course on white studies or on whiteness. However, over the last few years a number of modules are appearing in the US dedicated to the study of whiteness. There is also a Centre for the Study of White American Culture in New Jersey, USA, run by Jeff Hitchcock who also runs a whiteness forum on the World Wide Web.

In this regard, I am especially indebted to the work of the Martinique psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, whose theoretical insights have left an indelible mark upon my own research investigations. Fanon's remarkable text *Black Skin, White Masks*, first published in 1952, indicates that the study of whiteness is not as novel as we may have been led to presume from the recent spurt of collective volumes and 'Readers' in the area. According to Fanon, black subjects could be found to have internalised notions of white superiority as a consequence of colonisation. Fanon argues that the residue of whiteness can be traced in the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of black individuals even during the post-colonial period. Accordingly, he claims that colonial subjugation has established an inferiority complex in black subjects that encourages them to evoke 'white masks' of self-loathing.

Moreover, the trend towards viewing whiteness as socially constructed did not go unrecognised in Fanon's evocative accounts. Thus, he remarks how 'The ... Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is' (1952:29). He further notes that black subjects are increasingly faced with the dilemma 'turn white or disappear' (p.71). In *The Wretched of the Earth* this point is taken further: 'Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: "In reality, who am I?"' (1968:200). This stark question, 'who am I', haunts Fanon and many of his black compatriots unable to completely break with the notion of black inferiority. The refusal to 'act white' results in disappearance: 'I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility' (1993:224). The issue of white hostility also has the effect of disappearance in Ralph Ellison's (1952) novel, *Invisible Man*, published at the same time as *Black Skin, White Masks*. Ellison's tale begins with the following prologue:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus side-shows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach

me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me (p.7).

The psychoanalytic shift that occurs in the work of Fanon and Ellison, from objectifying black subjectivity (the ‘bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus side-shows’) to an appreciation of these images as the product of white fantasy is telling. In this moment we realise that because the black man is surrounded by figments of a white imagination, ultimately he is ‘invisible’<sup>29</sup>. This portrait gives Fanon’s question ‘who am I?’ further weight.

According to Fanon, the answer to this conundrum is as perplexing to blacks as it is to whites. Why? Because as Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us, it is not just a question of Black Skin, White Skin but *Black Skin, White Masks*. As a consequence, the internal confusion suffered by black subjects means that ‘a Negro is forever in combat with his own image’ (Fanon, 1952:136). Indeed, the partial identifications black subjects make with whiteness results in a series of painful split-perceptions. Small wonder that Frantz Fanon compares his own encounters with whites in terms of a fractured epidermal schema that evokes corporeal metaphors of psychic scarring, splitting and internal rupture. He recalls, ‘What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?’ (1993:222). The burning question ‘who am I?’ arises from internal confusion and the fact that, ‘not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man’ (1993:220). So, racial identities are constructed in relation to one another at levels of the social, and further elaborated at interior levels of the psychic. Jonathan Rutherford (1988) has noted how this interaction effectively produces what he calls, ‘The Whiteman’s Blackman’: ‘The white man allows the Black man one thing, his body. But it is a body filled with white fantasy and foreboding (1988:63). Here, the black subject is a prisoner of colonial fantasy, unable to break free of the imperious scrutiny of whites. Fanon explains how the intensity of a ‘white gaze’ freezes his movements until, ‘I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self’ (1993:220). This other self, the ever-present spectre of whiteness,

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<sup>29</sup> The theme of masquerade is picked up in a reconsideration of *Black Skin, White Masks* which is entitled *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*, published by the Institute of Contemporary Arts / inIVA. The foreword by Tawadros and Dexter explains: ‘The title *Mirage* alludes to the themes of deception, illusion, fantasy, dream, imagination and vision which run through *Black Skin, White Masks*, and which contribute so crucially to interpretations of race and sexuality’.



controls the black subject's every thought and action from without and within. In Fanonian terms what is often called the black soul is in actuality a white man's artefact. Recognising whiteness as not just an external relation accorded to whites, but an interior psycho-dynamic relation that operates within the lives of black peoples is a breathtaking finding in this work.

As we have already seen, Fanon makes use of personal anecdotes and medical metaphors to explain the tragic plight of the Negro. There is no better example of this than in his discussions of a 'white gaze', when he beseeches:

I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*. Having readjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare (1993:224).

And once again:

The white man had an anguished feeling that I was escaping from him and that I was taking something with me. He went through my pockets. He thrust probes into the last circumvolution of my brain. Everywhere he found only the obvious. So it was obvious that I had a secret (1993:231).

Many of Fanon's descriptions appeared to have a timeless appeal, for they were echoed in the accounts of black respondents in my research. His work allowed me to gain a subtle appreciation of the psychic processes involved in negotiating whiteness, and encouraged me to develop multi-layered interpretations of people's ethnic life-histories (Chapter 10). Another core issue that I have developed from Fanon concerns his compelling couplet, '*fear/desire*'. Rather than seeing these emotions as separate and distinct, he reveals how they interact with one another in a complex double articulation. This issue is discussed throughout the thesis, but what I found particularly useful in this concept was the appreciation of *ambivalence*. This allowed for a more sensitive means of capturing the complexities of young people's social experiences. As such, it also presented a magical, Houdini-like way out of the double-binds of rationalism, and gave me some insight into the interior landscape of

the unconscious. By drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall describes what he calls the 'doubling' of fear and desire<sup>30</sup>.

The play of identity and difference which constructs racism is powered not only by the positioning of blacks as the inferior species but also, and at the same time, by an inexpressible envy and desire; and this is something the recognition of which fundamentally *displaces* many of our hitherto stable political categories, since it implies a process of identification and otherness which is more complex than hitherto imagined (1993:255).

In the course of conducting ethnographic research, it was possible to detect numerous instances when the double-edged nature of racist interactions resulted in a fuzzy interplay between desire and loathing. At these points, psychoanalytical frames were a profoundly helpful means of engaging with the 'unspoken' articulations of whiteness. Indeed, discussions about the projection of envy and desire invariably entail a critique of whiteness as noted by Claire Pajaczkowska and Lola Young.

The blankness of the identity of empire covers an ambivalence which is often unconscious, and which, consequently, can most readily be perceived in the representations it creates of the colonial 'other'; representations which are projections of the 'split off' parts of the self (1993:202).

Psychoanalytical responses, then, mark a crucial step in the movement from a fascination with black subjectivity, towards a penetrative insight into the lacunae that is whiteness. The shift from Self to Other and then back again, became a means of 'making strange' the familiarity of white racial identity. Rather like a image from a mirror glass, which in turn is reflected in a second mirror elsewhere, psychoanalysis disrupted some the conventional ways of looking. It offered me, instead, a way of re-locating, and eventually returning the gaze, from the pathologised black subject to the seemingly 'perverse' enactment of white ethnicity. As such, accepted discourses of racism were turned upside-down, or, to be more accurate, inside-out.

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<sup>30</sup> In a later essay, in the collection *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, Stuart Hall considers why *Black Skin, White Masks* has come to take centre-stage in contemporary debates.

Edward Said (1995[1978]) has also capitalised on psychoanalytical understandings in his acclaimed thesis *Orientalism*. While Said's focus is upon East/West relations, what he respectively calls the 'Orient' and the 'Occident', his ideas retain critical meaning when it comes to understanding whiteness and the production of a black Other. Said describes 'Orientalism' as 'a science of incorporation' (p.17), the use of Western knowledge and technological know-how to re-present the East within an identifiable cultural register. As such, these communities are mediated by the process of 'Orientalism' and, in the Lacanian sense of identity, are at best 'imaginary'. Moreover, it was through this very process that Europe came to know itself through the image it constructed of the East. The Orient and its peoples are continually represented through their absence or 'lack' in relation to the West. 'The Orient', according to Said, 'was therefore not Europe's interlocutor, but its silent Other' (1984:17).

In this sense the East - Europe's silent Other - has no voice and exists merely as a community of interpretation, a narrative fiction. In this thesis the Western gaze, then, locates itself at the centre and relegates all other cultures to its far-flung periphery as marginal, Other. For my own analysis, the ways in which difference was ascribed to a black Other, could in turn be highly informative of the social constitution of whiteness. As we saw in the Chapter 1 the discourse of Orientalism, so frequently associated with the 'foreign', could be reproduced and played out on the bodies of a white-skinned, urban underclass (see also Chapter 8). This process could occur, in part, due to the migration and settlement of ethnic minorities to Britain's inner-cities, which meant these 'no-go' zones were given over to myth making and media reporting.

A further text that I would like to discuss in this section is Jonathan Rutherford's (1997) recent edition, *Forever England*. Through a series of case studies that include T. E. Lawrence (the acclaimed Lawrence of Arabia), the pastoral poet Rupert Brooke and the British nationalist Enoch Powell, Rutherford uses psychoanalytic perspectives to interpret the thorny issue of white, English masculinity. His polished account grew out of uncertainties with British Left politics, where the topic of whiteness and Englishness were continually disavowed through, 'a self-deception which could only be sustained by avoiding a range of awkward questions about our relationship with

white English ethnicity' (p.6). A welcome aspect of Rutherford's work is his willingness to inscribe race and sexuality at the heart of the imperial project. His psycho-sexual readings inject an internal anxiety into the white oblivion of English expansionism when he considers the genre of imperial adventure stories.

While women were constructed as the primary victims of this black and brown peril, its impetus lay in the projective fantasies of the white man who was enmeshed in anxieties of homosexual rape. This homoerotic tension found a representation in many of the adventure stories of the period, particularly when Englishmen donned a disguise to pass themselves off as a native (p.30).

Certainly, Jonathan Rutherford is able to provide compelling evidence of sexual anxieties in his selected biographical case study accounts. More the pity that a series of belated homoerotic letters have come to light in the wake of Enoch Powell's death, not long after the publication of *Forever England*<sup>31</sup>. In view of my own research, I was particularly taken with the focus on white, English ethnicities and have elaborated on this in Chapter 7. As Rutherford makes clear, the imperial legacy of the British Empire has not only left the formerly colonised peoples with great uncertainties, but it has also meant, 'White, English masculinity is in deep confusion over its history and identity' (p.11). This was certainly evident in the ethnographic research I conducted with young people in two English cities<sup>32</sup>.

#### *'Vanilla nightmares': Black artists and the white subconscious*

A recognisable, though eclectic resource that has emerged in the 'turn' to whiteness, can be found in the recent work of black artists. While there is not scope to do sufficient justice to the innovative presentation of racial identities within the art-based format, it remains evident that this work is in dialogue with post-colonial theory and black experiences. I am thinking here of the textual discussions that have taken place

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<sup>31</sup> Powell insisted that these letters should not be released until after his death. While he constructed himself as heterosexual, and at times appeared an austere asexual, these recent findings will no doubt lead to further considerations of his highly regimented life.

<sup>32</sup> I am indebted here to the writings of Phil Cohen whose work is discussed at some length in the following chapter concerning subcultural methods.

in a special issue of *Ten*.8 (1992) about Black British photography, and the plethora of single- and jointly-authored work on Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* by Kobena Mercer, Jane Gaines and Mercer and Julien<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, in the wake of Mapplethorpe's dazzling black and white stills of nude black males a number of artists have foreground issues of race, sexuality and whiteness. This is most apparent in the endeavours of Lyle Ashton Harris, Sonia Boyce, Adrian Piper, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Ingrid Pollard, Keith Piper and David A. Bailey to note just a few artists on the cutting-edge of contemporary race theory 'as practice'. Sonia Boyce's *United Colours of Birmingham* series, which featured black bodies in explicit sexual engagements with wealthy white figures, along with David A. Bailey's discussion of the same campaign invert the gaze back onto the white eye of power. Meanwhile, the photographic work of Lyle Ashton Harris and Rotimi Fani-Kayode has consciously made slippery racial, gendered and sexual categories of desire and repulsion. Keith Piper's hi-tech productions have further made white fantasies of the black body a subject of interrogation through exhibits such as *Step Into the Arena*, *Another Arena*, *Cargo Cultures* and *Nigger in Cyberspace*<sup>34</sup>. In Chapter 5 I will also consider Ingrid Pollard's photography in relation to whiteness, nationhood and the pastoral tradition.

However, the most explicit engagement with whiteness can be found in the work of the 'mixed-heritage' Afro-American artist, Adrian Piper. In September 1991, I visited the former venue of the Ikon Gallery in John Bright Street, Birmingham, to view her fascinating work. One of the highlights of the exhibition was a series of calling cards available to the audience, which carried the copyright signature 'Angry Art' on the reverse. The cards had messages that directly referred to white people's insecurity around black people. The calling card, a symbol of bourgeois etiquette, is generally associated with cultivated gentility or entrepreneurial acquisition. However, these cards aimed at puncturing the presumption of whiteness and were to be given to white strangers who kept their distance, grabbed their purses or pretended not to notice you. This direct, even rude intervention into white normalcy, seemed to break with the

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Mapplethorpe is a deceased white, gay photographer whose representations of sado-masochism and black male nudes have been a source of heated debate and censorship. I have also contributed to a discussion of the meaning of Mapplethorpe's work in an article for *Body & Society*, 3(3), September 1997, entitled 'Frozen Bodies'.

<sup>34</sup> This work was recently displayed in the *Relocating the Remains* exhibition at the Ikon Gallery, Broad Street, Birmingham 12 August - 27 September 1998.

conventions of the art gallery<sup>35</sup>. For a time, I even carried the card on my person and fantasised about handing it out to people who exchanged odd looks to one another or treated me with a degree of racial difference.

Amongst the most memorable portraits that Piper produced in the Birmingham exhibition was her 1986 *Vanilla Nightmares* series. These sketches vividly document the disturbing aspects of white fantasy and fear over black sexuality. The Fanonian theme of 'fear/desire' is evoked in *Vanilla Nightmares #8*, a charcoal sketch over a Bloomingdale's advert for 'Poison' perfume, placed in full-length copy of *The New York Times* (fig. 1.1). The sexual embrace made by a white-skinned model towards black men is undercut with the caption that 'Poison' is 'The Silent Potion Exclusively Ours For You'. The element of sexual danger is finally realised in the attack of vampirism which the woman surrenders to. *Vanilla Nightmares #18* (1987) meanwhile, is drawn over an advert for American Express, but is transformed into an index of whiteness with the caption, 'Membership Has Its Privileges' (fig. 1.2). Here, the blackened ~~hordes~~ with their faces pressed up to the frame, are kept firmly out of the echelons of white privilege. The horror theme is maintained in the glassy-eyed, expressionless features of the multitude of black zombies. As the series title of *Vanilla Nightmares* notes, these images essentially deal with the phantasmogoric machinations of the white unconscious, an unnatural realm where sex, vampires and zombies proliferate.

Ultimately, I found the psychoanalytical approaches discussed in this section useful on a number of levels. The emphasis on the interior landscapes of the unconscious meant 'unspoken' investments, desires and anxieties could still have some place within the overall study. Moreover, the importance of seeing whiteness as not just socially but *psychically* realised provided me with a deeper knowledge of how identities are constituted from 'without' and 'within'. I found the method of particular use when discussing narratives of cultural identity (Chapter 10). Here, repetitive themes and signifiers could be psychoanalysed within the broader frame of a life-history method. Despite these clear advantages the use of psychoanalytic techniques is a complex issue. As a result, I have used psychoanalysis not to get at

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<sup>35</sup> Adrian Piper has also used the medium of street performance as a basis for her live art.

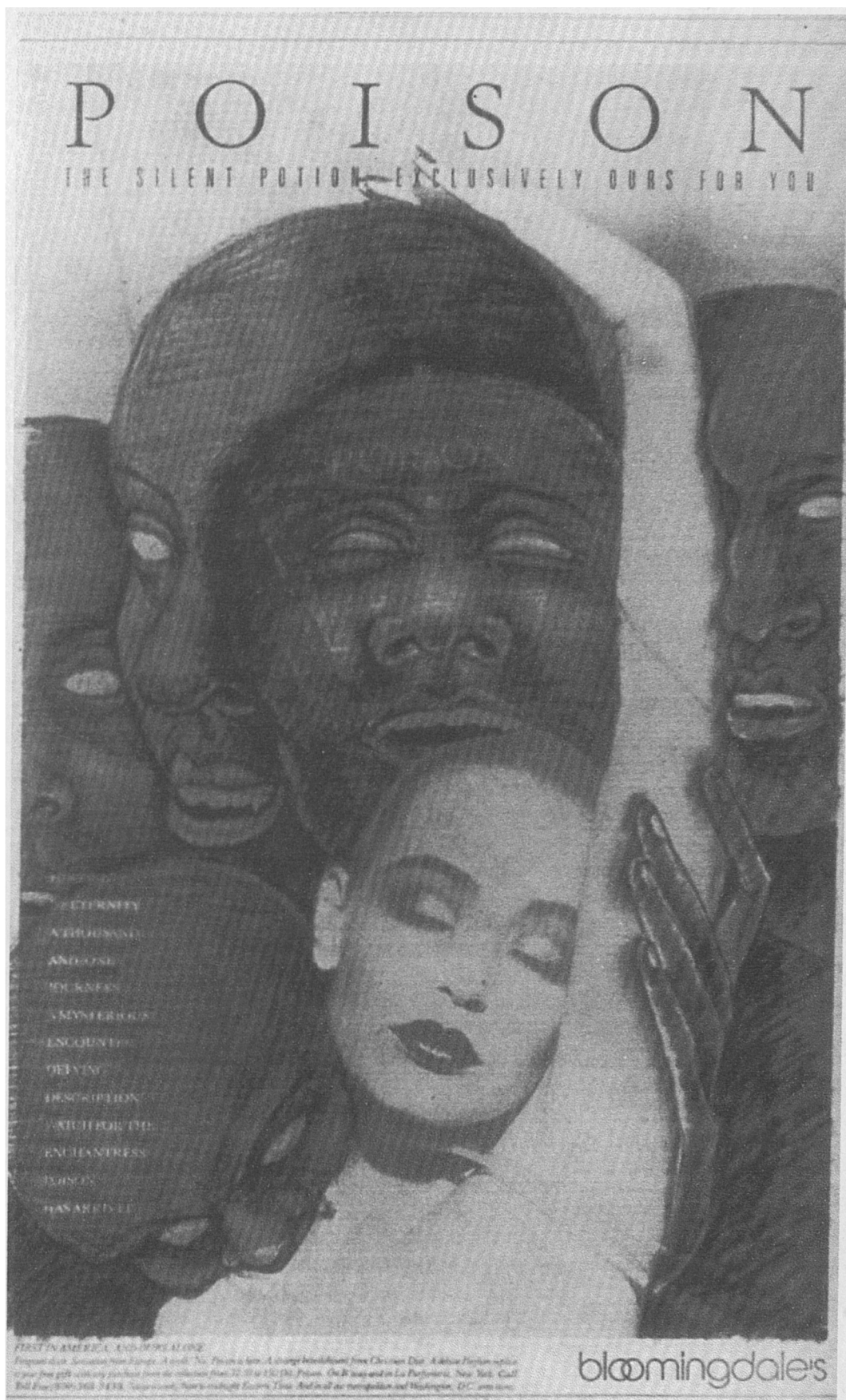
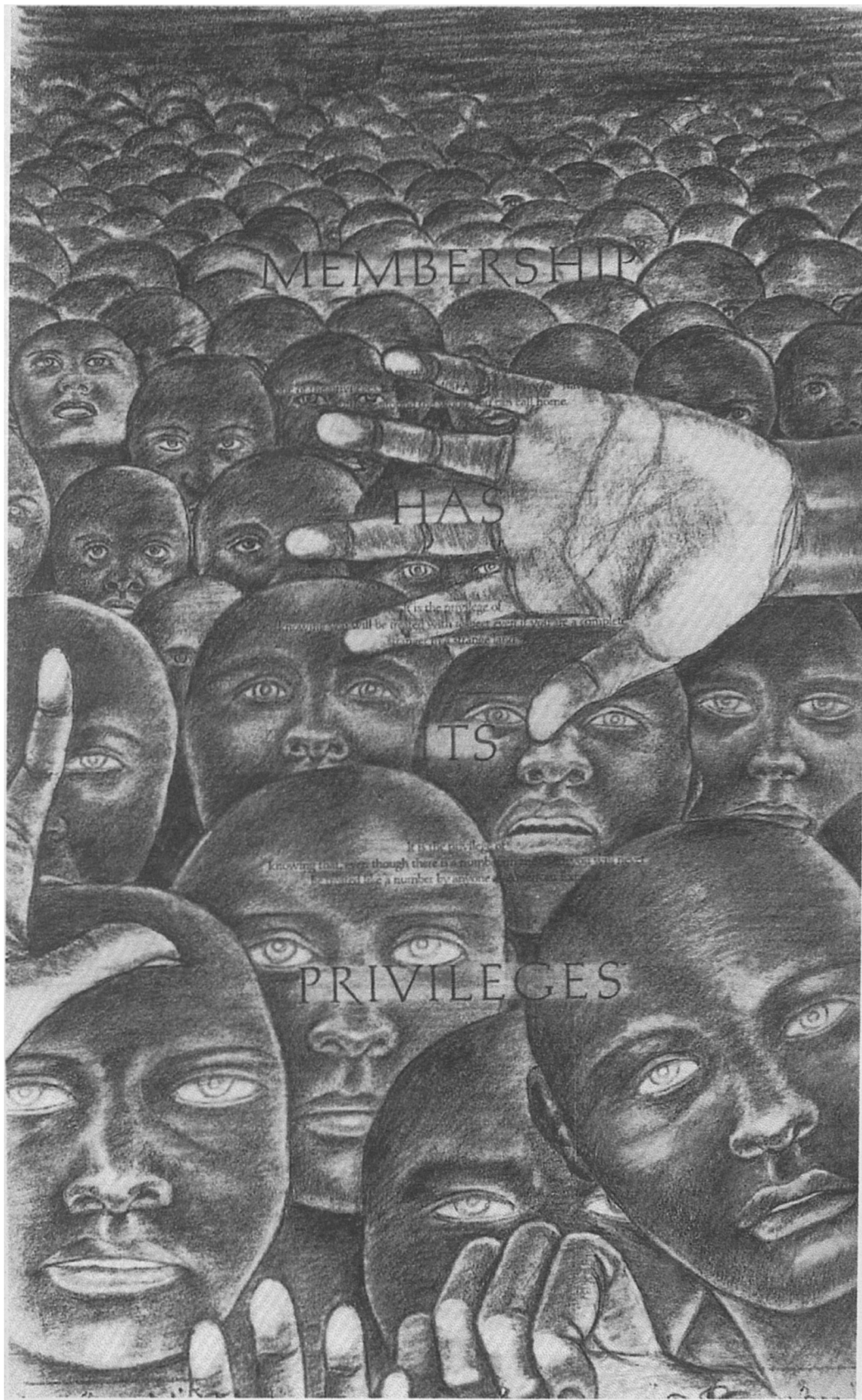


Fig. 1.1 Adrian Piper, *Vanilla Nightmares* 8, 1986



*Fig. 1.2 Adrian Piper, Vanilla Nightmares, 18, 1987*



the hidden 'truth' of the individual but to provide a suggestive, open argument in line with the available ethnographic evidence. A refreshing quality about psychoanalysis remained its ability to turn the focus away from the excessive bodies of the hypersexual black Other, and in on the phobic uncertainties of white racial identities. Indeed, the racialised tropes used by white youth to describe their black counterparts could be strategically utilised to deconstruct the constitution of whiteness in these peer-group arenas. Moreover, psychoanalytic readings enabled me to maintain interconnections between race and sexuality that were prevalent throughout the research.

Of further value was the appreciation of ambivalence, which allowed for a sophisticated means of capturing the ambiguities of social identity while engaging with accounts that were internally contradictory<sup>36</sup>. Thus, psychoanalysis can be especially useful for describing the seemingly irrational investments made by young people within particular subject formations (Cohen, 1988). Noticeably, my use of psychoanalytic frames does not extend beyond the literature on race and ethnicity<sup>37</sup>. In this sense, I have engaged with psychoanalysis sparingly and used it as an instrument to slice beneath the outer-skin of identity formation. A more general point of concern with the method lies with the tendency for psychoanalysis to abstract itself from other social and material relations. This is especially problematic when it comes to strategies of collective challenge since in psychoanalysis the concern is often with individual psychic trauma. Subsequently, the Marxist journal *Race & Class* have lambasted the psychoanalytical inflections in Phil Cohen's research and alluded to his approach as 'Framing the white working class' (Fekete, 1998:79). The review goes on to disparage Cohen for sanctioning 'Therapy for white boys' (p.81) and points to the absence of an historical perspective in the research by claiming that 'history is out' and 'deconstructing masculinity' is in. The patronising elements of the psychoanalytical paradigm are made evident in a harsh conclusion of Cohen's work which claims, 'if he isn't quite the new Messiah, Cohen, and his followers, are

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<sup>36</sup> For example this meant that when 'untruthfulness' was apparent during interview, the issue was not focused around 'truth' and 'falsehood', but on the meaning and reasoning behind cover-ups. In other words, I could ask myself why was it important for the respondent to tell this version of the story, in this way, at this particular moment, to this researcher?

<sup>37</sup> While I have not had time to discuss the various schools of psychoanalytic thought, suffice to say that there are a number of competing traditions regarding the production of identity, making it all the harder to provide systematic readings of the unconscious.

thoroughly modern missionaries, only this time the jungle is not the black jungle of Africa but the white jungle of London's East End' (p.82). While many of these comments are an inappropriate appraisal of Cohen's outstanding work in the area the cultural studies trend away from 'grass-roots' politics towards high-brow academic theory is indisputable. In this sense, we need to be attentive to the strengths and limitations of psychoanalytic frameworks. Ultimately, psychoanalytic theories seem an unhelpful ground for resisting and organising against white hostility with an emphasis on the individual rather than the collective. However, the method excels when it comes to shedding light on the psychic experience of racism, the contradictory behaviour of young people and the ambivalence of occupying a white identity. For these reasons I have deployed psychoanalysis as a tool to prise open an aperture into the white unconscious.

## **Conclusion**

In this literature review I have considered various writings on whiteness, these may be placed within three identifiable repertoires - materialist, deconstructionist and psychoanalytic. Rather than discussing every individual essay on whiteness I chose to focus on this broader thematic trajectory. My own research borrows extensively from each of these frameworks and I have tried to highlight some of the most useful points of interconnection. At the same time, some attempt has been made to read each of the paradigms through one another in order to illustrate the conceptual constraints and knots of theoretical tension that arise. For example it was possible to read the materialist accounts through deconstructive analyses to gain an insight into the contextual limitations of focusing solely on the site of labour and work relations. Likewise, one could read the psychoanalytical studies back through the lens of materialism to view the shortcomings that appear when it comes to the organisation of a politics of social justice, and so on.

To a certain extent I have tried to keep each of these competing traditions in play, by emphasising that research into whiteness should maintain a recognition of historical process, a sensitivity to context and an ability to move beyond the limits of the rationalist discourses of racism and cultural identity. This is no simple task as the

tensions between these frameworks can result in competing ‘truths’. However, throughout the research my starting point has been to foreground the viewpoints of respondents and, where appropriate, read these statements alongside the existing literature. This grounded theory approach has at times contradicted some of the existing claims made about whiteness, though this is not necessarily a bad thing in itself. For example, with the exception of Charles Ghallagher (1995), the majority of writers in the area have continued to write about the taken-for-grantedness of whiteness<sup>38</sup>. His work, like my own, demonstrates that whiteness is not always a social norm in the lives of young people.

A more general criticism that can be applied to a great deal of the work on whiteness, is the seemingly monotonous focus on US relations. As a consequence I found that while much of the writing on whiteness was of academic interest, it could not be applied to the specificity of the English context. For these reasons I carried out historical analysis related to the post-industrial development of whiteness in English cities in Chapter 1. Here, Victorian and Edwardian urban reports were a particularly incisive resource for analysing whiteness. Moreover, I have had to extend my literary inquiry to include research on British youth culture, which is discussed in the Chapter 4. In many ways I view the interdisciplinary composition of this thesis as a strength rather than a weakness. The work draws on sociology, history, cultural studies, social geography and literary perspectives. As such, the thesis represents an embodied ethnographic study of whiteness whose aim is largely explorative, seeking to critically engage with white, English identities rather than ‘abolish’, ‘deconstruct’ or ‘psychoanalyse’ them into obscurity.

In the next two chapters we will turn our attention to issues of method and methodology (Chapter 3, 4). The first is concerned with the cultural identities of the researcher/researched and how this impinges upon the micro-politics of research. The latter focuses upon British subcultural studies of youth and the use of ethnography in

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<sup>38</sup> As we shall go on to find in an ethnographic case study of the Kempton Dene Skins (Chapter 5) whiteness not normative but clearly exhibited. These youth were obsessive about preserving whiteness against what they perceived to be the mass influx of migrants into Britain, and notably the West Midlands region. For them, whiteness could not be taken-for-granted, for it was undergoing a sharp crisis of confidence from the cultural dialects of new, emergent ethnicities. These young men took it upon themselves to become the guardians of whiteness, Birmingham’s ‘Pale Warriors’.

the analysis of everyday experience. Chapter 3, then, provides a careful description of how the work was undertaken before discussing the attendant theoretical issues that arise related to subjectivity, positionality and the micro-politics of research. The chapter discusses the need for social science investigators to 'reckon' with the racial identities of the ethnic majority and reflexively consider how this influences relations between the researcher/researched. Due consideration is also given the constructive process of research including the act of data selection, interpretation and validation. In particular, the chapter seeks to investigate the contingent nature of conducting ethnographic fieldwork and draws attention to the complex dynamics that arise. Accordingly, short excerpts from respondent transcripts have been utilised with a view to illustrating the empirical realities encountered when carrying out fieldwork with young people in everyday settings. As such, the chapter demonstrates how racism can come to shape the research encounter. The section further considers epistemological ideas and calls for a robust anti-essentialist approach to research relations. It is argued that such an approach to the theory of method may yet implode the all-too-familiar black/white binary that underscores much methodological praxis.

# **Subjectivity, Positionality and the Micro-politics of Research**

## **Chapter 3**

## Introduction

In what amounts to a delightful understatement on the subject, Barry Troyna has described the act of researching race with young people as 'a tricky business' (1995:386). He provides a summary of the numerous points that have inspired a series of methodological debate in the area.

Among the issues that have been put under the spotlight are: the stance and status of the researcher; the rationale for the research; the focus of the researcher's gaze; the way in which key theoretical, conceptual and analytical terms are conceptualised and operationalised; the conduct of the researcher and the nature of the social relations which are established 'in the field'; processes through which the data are produced, interpreted and presented; and the un/intended audiences of the research report (p.386).

Given the multiple problems that research on youth and ethnicity generates, I have reserved space to comment in some depth on the subjective biographies of researcher/researched and to discuss how these relations influence the types of responses elicited. The chapter begins by documenting the 'nuts-and-bolts' of how the research was undertaken before moving on to consider more substantial theoretical issues. In these later parts I will explore issues of positionality, epistemology, subjectivity, data analysis and the complexity of experiencing that which has been described as living the ethnographic life. The appendix contains a break down of the participant sample.

For a fifteen-month period between 1993-94 I worked as a full-time researcher on an ESRC (Economic Social Science Research Council) project investigating the activities of perpetrators of racist violence<sup>39</sup>. The project aimed to explore how racist

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<sup>39</sup> The comparative research was entitled, *The Social Basis of Racist Action Amongst Young People in Outer-City Areas* (ESRC 000234272). The project was led by Les Back and Roger Hewitt, in the respective communities of the West Midlands and London. I would especially like to mention the influence of Les Back as he guided me through some 'tricky' moments in the Midlands-based research.

ideas were translated into racist actions. The work was situated in outer-city districts as these were found to be the most likely spaces in which the geography of racist violence was to occur (see Chapter 5). The research was conducted in two large industrial centres, the West Midlands and London. I was responsible for carrying out the research in the West Midlands and conducted a series of interviews with young people in schools, youth clubs and neighbourhood environments. A number of interviews were also conducted with youth workers, the police force, housing officers, the local council, anti-racist activists and the victims of racist violence. As part of the research project I worked evenings as a youth worker to experience first-hand the cultures of young people. It was during this period that we were invited by a member of the youth service to attend another outer-city youth club.

While racism amongst young people was certainly present in the first youth club I worked in, the sharp degree of white hostility in the second club was unmistakable. The Kempton Dene club was occupied by a cohort of Skinhead youth who had developed a reputation for 'hardness' and racism throughout the locality. Their biographies and the social geography of the locality are discussed elsewhere (Chapter 5). Although the focus of this initial research had been with racism I became increasingly concerned with notions of white ethnicity. Moreover, it appeared that the Skins had achieved a hegemonic status over ideas of nationhood, whiteness and Englishness. This drew my attention to the limited subject positions open to young people for the 'making' of a positive white, English ethnicity that was not marked with the ugly stain of racism. Indeed, was it at all possible to fashion a positive white identity in the present post-imperial moment that was unencumbered by the chains of nationalism? The ethnographic research in the West Midlands conurbation drew upon multiple methods including group and individual interviews with the Kempton Dene Skins, the use of visual data (video and photography), field-notes<sup>40</sup> and census material. Accounts made by school students of the Skins as well as those reported by the police youth workers and local community workers were also included. However,

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<sup>40</sup> Extensive field-notes pertaining to a number of months were recorded and logged on computer disks. However, wherever possible I have preferred to draw on actual interviews and have used the diaries for self-reference and cross-checking details.

priority is given to what the Skins themselves have to say about racism, whiteness and nationhood.

In October 1995 I took up a scholarship at the Department of Geography, University of Newcastle upon Tyne to research whiteness. I had already intended to carry out doctoral research in this area and was contacted by my supervisor Alastair Bonnett who had come to hear of my interest through other contacts. At the time I was unacquainted with the Northeast region but realised that extending the research to a mainly-white area such as Tyneside would enable me to explore further my interest in whiteness. The focus on young people and white cultural identity seemed especially apt as it drew upon my previous experience of working with this target group. During my first year in Tyneside I read what little research there was in the area of whiteness but felt somewhat dissatisfied with the overbearing emphasis on the US situation (Chapter 2). Interesting though this literature was, it did not speak directly to white experiences in the English context. Having already worked tiring evenings as a youth worker to carry out research with young people, this time I decided to contact local schools. Letters were written and follow-up calls were made to those schools in which I had some level of contact. At this point I was not entirely clear as to how the research would proceed. I presented the work as being concerned with young people's perspectives on ethnicity. I made it clear that I was interested in the cultural identities of young people and their attitudes towards issues of nationhood. In the preliminary meetings I did not mention the word whiteness for fear that it would either require in-depth explanation or that I would be seen as a black activist, insensitive to the complex cultures of white youth.

Two-year longitudinal research was conducted in two Tyneside schools; one was mainly-white the other multicultural. However, I was less concerned with comparing and contrasting these institutions with one another and more interested in understanding the process of ethnicity in young people's lives. In this sense, the research does not aim to be 'representative' but rather pursues an established ethnographic tradition concerned with comprehending the rich tapestry of people's



social lives. In keeping with the work conducted in the youth clubs the school-based research involved interviews, participant observation and direct interaction. To get to know students better and also make a contribution to the institutions I researched in, I helped put on a school play and supervised students when teaching staff were absent or stretched. Once again ethnographic methods were instrumental, they included taped interviews and observations of students in classroom settings, during break-time and whilst we ate lunch-time meals in the school refectory. In this sense my own personal interactions with young people became a central part of the investigation. Taped interviews were conducted over the course of the research from late-1995 up to 1997. These discussions were personally transcribed and pseudonyms were given to disguise people, institutions and neighbourhoods. Students were also given assurances concerning the confidentiality of the research and wherever possible were shown transcripts for further clarification or editing. The discussions were open-ended and organised around a loose collection of themes e.g. the locality, violence, music, employment, racism, friendships etc. Frequently I took cues from students and was willing to allow conversations to develop along multiple paths of enquiry. Here, there was a preference for discussion of those issues that touched students most directly. Allowing students to express their immediate concerns was a double-edged sword. On the one hand it was deeply time consuming, on the other it allowed participants to raise hitherto unidentified issues that encouraged me to refine my research outline. As a result I became more attentive to the significance of local 'Geordie' identity and youth subcultures. This long-term strategy allowed me to gain a fuller understanding of young people's social lives and provided for a more rounded interpretation of their biographies.

A key problem I had encountered in the fieldwork was the inability to pin-down young people's experiences of white ethnicity. Unlike the Skins who obsessively spoke and performed their whiteness, most young people were less forthcoming. On the surface discussions concerning racism, Britishness and blackness appeared easier to elicit than an engagement with whiteness. Consequently, we each struggled for a language beyond the discourse of racism with which to address whiteness. Indeed, for a long time I was uncertain whether I could successfully achieve an analysis of white

youthful identities. It was during this time that subcultural methods became a critical technology of research. Clearly, the Kempton Dene Skins provided a vivid example of subcultural belonging yet I had not anticipated the value of such a research method. As I go on to explain in Chapter 4 subcultural practice offered a penetrative insight into the exhibition of white ethnicity. The subcultural emphasis also drew my attention to the relationship between political economy and culture. Furthermore, it revealed how white youth come to define their cultural identities through and against one another and said much about the meaning of ethnicity in young people's daily lives. In the absence of a shared grammar with which to talk about whiteness a further realisation surfaced. The discussions that white youth had about blackness - black music, black culture, black bodies - was in retrospect highly informative about how they perceived their white ethnicities. It was only as I began to transcribe the interviews and think about the arising issues that this came to light. Fortunately, I carried out the transcription throughout the fieldwork period so could return to these themes in discussion.

In the following chapter I will further discuss the value of ethnography and the approaches deployed by researchers when using subcultural methods. As we shall find, the use of a subcultural methodology raises a number of questions related to power, method, representation and authenticity. We will now turn our attention to some of the theoretical issues that arise when conducting research on the ethnicities of young people. In particular I will address core theoretical issues related to the discursive interplay of ethnicity in fieldwork encounters; the subjectivities of researcher/researched; the social construction of knowledge; the methods for interpreting and checking empirical data. I will also allude to critical incidents in the research that expose the sensitive nature of ethnographic enquiry when researching white youthful identities.

*Hiding in the Light: The unexamined white researcher*

We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always "in context", *positioned*. (Hall, [original emphasis] 1990:222).

Much of the work that has been carried out in the area of race and ethnicity has been conducted by white researchers on black communities. Despite this research dynamic, few white researchers have seriously interrogated their whiteness at any great length beyond a mere statement of their ethnicity and a brief footnote on power relations. Consequently, black cultural critics such as Lawrence (1982) have critiqued the epistemological status of 'white sociology' and drawn attention to 'the tendency of white sociologists to obscure the question of their relationship to the black people they study; a relationship which is structured by racism' (pp.133-134). In all but a few cases such studies have tended to efface questions of whiteness while maintaining a diplomatic silence concerning the differing social locations that exist between white researchers and black respondents. At its worst, this body of work has operated with an underlying ethnocentrism which implies black communities are in need of investigation since they effectively constitute a 'problem' for the rest of society (Gilroy, 1987). In turn this has led to pathologizing perceptions of minority groups as 'caught between two cultures', 'emasculated' or suffering from 'negative self-image'. In contrast Mairtin Mac an Ghaill, the author of the study *Young, Gifted and Black* (1988), was to later critically reflect on such an initial research methodology:

My research design implicitly shared the white norm of classifying black students as a 'problem'. The substantive issues focused upon the deviant students and methodological and data techniques were employed to meet the culturalist assumptions of this theoretical approach (1993:146).

In her study of Muslim women in Britain, Claire Dwyer (1999) experienced similar obstacles. She recalls, 'As a starting point it is important to acknowledge that as a "white" researcher working with predominantly Asian women I replicated the

dominant power relations structuring research on young British Muslims which has produced a legacy of "culturalist" assumptions' (cited in Laurie *et.al.* 1999:49). Such reflections raise epistemological concerns about who knows what about whom, and how this knowledge is legitimated (Maynard, 1994). In the light of such crude misconceptions, black critics have questioned the role of white researchers and their intentions when conducting studies of minority communities (CCCS, 1982; Amos & Parmar, 1984). However, as we shall go on to discuss in Chapter 4, the notion of whether 'insiders' or 'outsiders' are better placed to carry out research on respective communities is a debate that is itself in danger of setting up a false dichotomy. This issue notwithstanding, Morgan and Stanley (1993) have shown that 'white assumptions have not only set the agenda, but also whiteness has been excluded from the category 'race'/ethnicity and has become a non-topic within sociology' (pp.20-21).

A mark of the absence of whiteness from sociological debate can be seen when researchers who (implicitly) self-identify as 'white', rarely endeavour to explain how their ethnicities may shape daily interactions during qualitative research. Instead, whiteness is only made an issue when researching in certain instances, usually when interviewing black respondents or in anthropological accounts where the focus is upon different cultures and the researcher's white ethnicity can no longer pass as the unobserved norm. In contrast, there remains an irony to the fact that while black researchers are invariably asked to account for the influence of *their* ethnic identities in much qualitative research, the ethnicities of white researchers go largely unspoken. As we saw in the previous chapter a narrow cohort of white researchers are now beginning to consider their personal biographies as racially inscribed texts (Ware, 1993; Frankenberg, 1994; Macintosh, 1997; Dyer, 1997). In a rare disclosure of white subjectivity the social geographer Gillian Rose reflects upon the influence of her ethnicity to the discipline:

Obviously, my own position is empowered by my whiteness. I may feel marginalised in geography as a woman, but my whiteness has enabled my critique of geographical discourses by allowing me to get close enough to them to have a good look (1993:15).

While a consideration of whiteness is still somewhat unusual within the academy it should be recalled that much of this writing has in large part been inspired by black feminist writing in the area (Carby, 1982; hooks, 1993; Morrison, 1992). In an early special issue on black feminism for the journal *Feminist Review* (1984), Carmen Williams contributes a biting poem entitled 'White Woman, Hey'. These examples of righteous black anger are just some of the stimuli that have encouraged a select number of writers to engage with whiteness and question the influence of race upon their own lives and research.

Given the sensitivity required for conducting research on young peoples' ethnicities we may wonder what questions arise when a black researcher investigates whiteness. Are the issues of power, representation and methodology the same? Clearly not, but this should not be used as an excuse to eschew ethical dilemmas. It in no way serves to make the process of research any less of a 'tricky business'. However, it has also been argued that black researchers experience a subordinate existence in relation to white norms so may have a deeper understanding of the pervasive power of whiteness through their everyday experiences. Thus, Ruth Frankenberg admits that 'there is a cultural/racial specificity to white people, at times more obvious to people who are not white than to white individuals' (1994:5). Similarly the American black feminist scholar bell hooks (1992) has discussed the 'special' knowledge of whiteness that blacks have acquired in their observations of whites in order to cope with the effects of racism. In her own teaching practice, hooks found that 'white students respond with naïve amazement that black people critically assess white people from a standpoint where "whiteness" is the privileged signifier' (p.167). Furthermore, in a study of second-generation South Asian women in Northern England, Jasbir Puar discovered that respondents had a 'strategic comprehension' (1995:27) of whiteness. In this sense it may be argued that an individual who has either a migrant experience or holds a dual black/British identity is often endowed with something akin to W.E.B. Du Bois famous description of a 'double consciousness'. What these statements imply is certainly not that black people are imbued with a mystical knowledge of whiteness from birth, but rather have had to learn to negotiate its exigencies from an early age

and may have become attuned to its daily operations through their own cultural experiences. In short, the notion that whiteness is not an unspoken norm in the lives of many black people has yet to be fully realised (see Chapter 10).

At the same time, I would like to make clear that essentialist notions which perceive this research to be simply about a black researcher investigating whiteness cannot do justice to the myriad of subject positions that arise in the overall course of ethnography. As such, it is all but impossible to quantitatively measure what Rhodes (1994) calls 'race of interviewer effects' and unequivocally ascertain the influence of a researcher's ethnicity upon the interviewing process. Indeed, in my own experience, I would argue that perceptions of ethnic identity may alter over time, notably when there is sustained contact with respondents such as through the ethnographic methods deployed here. In this sense the ethnicities of researcher/researched do not necessarily statically cohere but may fluidly interact through a set of dynamic negotiations within particular research settings. This means that while I may be cognisant of the fact that my ethnicity has an influence upon the types of exchanges that occur during fieldwork, it is difficult to pin-down how, why and at what points ethnicity becomes an issue. In most interview situations the cultural identity of the researcher is seldom called into question directly by respondents, yet it invariably underpins the research encounter. This makes it all the harder to grasp the meaning of race, ethnicity and whiteness in fieldwork interactions. Moreover, the extent to which a researcher's ethnicity can be divorced from other personal characteristics - as well as aspects related to class, age, gender and sexuality - further obscure the issue. In this sense, the ethnicities of researcher/researched remain part of a shifting matrix of relations in which the configurations of power and subjectivity are continually in flux (see Henriques *et.al.* 1998[1984]). However, in the same way that some white researchers 'fixed' the identities of black interviewees under the label of being a 'problem', I found that research participants could also constrain the researcher's identity through racist discourses. This implied that ethnicities were being produced in the fieldwork encounter as we will now investigate.

### *Ethnicity and the production of cultural identities in fieldwork encounters*

At certain moments respondents may directly invoke lines of ethnic difference to draw up boundaries between the researcher/researched. While this process may serve multiple functions, recourse to racist discourses can be an effective means of asserting power and white authority. In this sense the established, simplistic dynamic of the 'powerful' researcher and the 'powerless' subject of research is brought into question. Drawing on poststructuralist and Foucaultian ideas, Valerie Walkerdine (1990) has shown in her nursery school study that power is continually struggled over. Moreover, individuals are not unitary subjects but are 'produced as a nexus of subjectivities, in relations of power which are constantly shifting' (p.3). Thus, racist discourses are at times deployed by respondents to invoke a momentary shift in the dynamic of power between researcher/researched. However, this should not blind us to the unequal relations of power that more usually exist between researcher/researched. Thus, in my research with the Kempton Dene Skins I had the social mobility to leave their neighbourhood estate once the ethnography was completed. I also had the cultural power to translate their lives into academic writing to further my own purposes. The power I had as a researcher in these instances should not be underestimated. The ethical issue of who represents whom and for what reasons is debated in the following chapter in which the value of 'insider' and 'outsider' accounts is discussed.

Rather than finding that my cultural heritage prohibited young people from discussing racism, it could at times act as a catalyst for debate. An example of how visible ethnicities can become an unexpected resource for documenting racism occurred during an early group-interview with the Kempton Dene Skins. At the time I had long, shoulder-length curly hair, which became a further point of difference between myself and the subcultural group I spoke with<sup>41</sup>. This form of presentation combined

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<sup>41</sup> The skinhead hatred of Hippies and those with long hair is renowned. John Clarke (1976:102) found that 'The skinhead operational definition of "queer" seems to have extended to all those males who by their standards looked "odd" ...'. A key feature of this antagonism is the sense that long hair represents an effeminate style, a point that is immediately referenced in the Kempton Dene Skins's comment about 'dirty' homosexual acts of oral sex. However, in the book and filmic presentation of *The Buddha of Suburbia* Karim, the central protagonist, is also involved in a number of heterosexual liaisons.

with an explicit racism in a way that brought my identity as an Asian researcher sharply into focus.

Darren: He looks like the one off ... *Buddha of Suburbia*.

Robbie: Oh aah - That dirty paki! He gives that bloke a blow-job at the end.

Darren: I think it's him!

In this early interaction with the Skinheads, colour-based racism became a means of establishing the peer-group however tenuously as white<sup>42</sup> and the researcher as 'foreign', Other. The interaction served to constitute our respective cultural identities and as such was revealing of the production of ethnicity in fieldwork encounters. However, the comments also drew upon established codified practices relating to sexuality and gender, as we shall find in Chapter 5. More importantly, in this instance my cultural identity was crucial in revealing what was to be a key theme in the subcultural study. The early interaction signalled what was to later emerge as a *leitmotif* for my analysis of the Kempton Dene Skins: the interplay of race and sexuality. As Mairtin Mac an Ghaill has noted, 'There is much work to be done to explore further the way ... social relations of 'race' simultaneously 'speak' gender and sexuality (for example, the ways in which to be a 'paki' is also to be a 'poof', is to be a non-proper boy' (1996:16). We can but speculate on whether this sex/race aperture would have opened up so readily with white interviewers, though the issue was to become an important theme in Skinhead biographies. It is not, then, the case that 'racial-matching' is the way forward, where black researchers can only conduct work with black interviewees or vice-versa, but rather a case of recognising partial truths, drawn from multiple research positions that may in turn give rise to fragmented points of similarity and difference (Phoenix, 1994). Instead of viewing one account as inherently 'better' than another on the basis of ethnic ascription we may wish to treat these reports 'as situated and contingent, creative, multiple mappings of a complex and multi-faceted reality or realities' (Rhodes, 1994:548).

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<sup>42</sup> The peer-group contained two mixed-heritage youth whose relationship with the other Kempton Dene Skins will be discussed in Chapter 4.



Moreover, the notion of the absence or presence of ethnicity in interview situations may be somewhat misleading. One pit-fall is that this ignores the impact of whiteness and white ethnicity upon research. Instead, it may be beneficial to view the ethnicities of the researcher/researched as a dynamic process constituted in the temporal and spatial zones allocated in the discursive interplay of the fieldwork interaction. This would imply that cultural identities are actually produced and given meaning in interview interactions. Such a claim would mark a radical departure from simply describing field research in terms of a closed 'black/white' binary. Indeed, the limited literature in the area has invariably tended to focus on the 'pre-given' identity of the researcher/researched, rather than explore how these identities are themselves discursively constituted in the interview process. Here, there remains a danger of viewing identity in essentialist ways, instead of seeing the interview situation as itself a process of becoming, a 'moment of being' (Stanley, 1990). Consideration should then be given to the performance of identities and the forms of stylised enactment that occur in the particular dynamic of the interviewer/interviewee relation. In this sense I am arguing for an awareness of the *production* of social identities through the interviewing process, over the commonly-held *a priori* assumption of identity. While this approach would make it all the more difficult to assess the influence of 'race of interviewer effects', it may lead to a more nuanced interpretation of the complexities entailed when conducting social science investigation.

Thus, the multiple ways in which aspects of ethnicity are evoked - or not - in these exchanges could be of more concern than an obsession with the (often essentialist) 'racial specificities' of the researcher/researched. This would mean a deeper investigation of the contextual contingency of discourses of race and ethnicity rather than a focus simply on the cultural identities of researcher/researched. As Paul Gilroy (1994[1992]:50) explains, 'At a theoretical level "race" needs to be viewed much more contingently, as a precarious discursive construction'. Here, the ontological status of race, what is culturally ascribed to this category, and how these associations are enacted in particular moments and contextual spaces is of more concern. As others have found, the tendency to polarise ethnicities through conventional black/white

binaries is particularly problematic for mixed-heritage researchers/researched who most clearly occupy 'multiple positionings' (Song & Parker, 1995). Therefore, it may be more fruitful to consider which aspects of ethnicity are invoked in particular situations and which parts are not. Heidi Nast (1994) uses the concept of 'betweenness' to capture the multiple nodes of intersection and dissonance encompassed in the researcher/researched dynamic. She explains her usage of the term: 'Betweenness highlights the fact that we can never *not* work with "others" who are separate and different from ourselves; difference is an essential aspect of all social interactions that requires that we are always everywhere in between or negotiating the worlds of me and not me' (1994:57). It was precisely by exploring the split between the 'me' and 'not me' that I was able to conduct research with participants of various persuasions (Skinhead youth with racist opinions, or white youth who expressed a desire to 'be' black) and eventually make the shift from fieldwork relations to 'writing up'.

While I have pointed out that assessing 'race of interviewer effects' is a highly problematic project, it is nevertheless important to discuss moments where issues of ethnicity are directly encountered during research. Over a seven-year period (1993-1999), interviews, participant observation, ethnographic evidence, historiography and narrative data on whiteness were collected, transcribed, analysed and written up by myself. However, a co-researcher Les Back who identified as white was present throughout interviews with the Kempton Dene Skins and I would like to recognise his influence here. Indeed, the shared interviewer role allowed us to raise the issue of 'race of interviewer effects'. One evening when I had been unable to attend a session Les asked the Skins whether there was anything they had wished to say in my absence. The reply was emphatic, 'You told us to say what we thought, and we said what we wanted to say'. Evidently, in this research situation the young men prided themselves on speaking their mind and saying what they felt regardless of my presence/absence. Indeed, they speculated whether my absence had been caused by their blunt and pronounced racist opinions: had I 'bottled it' they wondered?

Whereas my ethnicity may have not hindered discussion with the Skins, and arguably may have become a point of further remark, this was not the case in other research settings. After completing a set of focus-group interviews with young mothers, I was later informed by a youth worker that the participants would have liked to have said more about their feelings towards black people but felt inhibited by my (black) presence. In retrospect it was difficult to assess how and in what ways my cultural identity had impacted upon the research, though the suggestion was that in this case it had a masking effect, policing the responses of interviewees. According to Ann Phoenix (1994) in such circumstances it may be of use to have researchers from different ethnic backgrounds. She explains, 'If different types of accounts about "race" and racism are produced with black and with white interviewers this is in itself important data and may be good reason for using interviewers of both colours<sup>43</sup> [sic.] whenever possible since it illustrates the ways in which knowledges are "situated"' (p.66). Moreover, the notion of knowledge as 'situated', contingent and variously accessible indicates that ethnicity need not have a deterministic effect on the outcome of research.

My interactions with young people in schools and youth clubs sometimes resulted in the establishment of quite intimate relations. At the same time, in other contexts and situations I could quickly become the subject of ridicule. An example of this occurred one evening while working in the Holbury youth club when no one seemed to want to talk to me, as described in this extract of my fieldwork diary.

Field-notes, June 7th 1993

*In the senior club I felt particularly awkward and distant today. Normally some of the girls usually say hello and ask me how I am but everyone seemed to be avoiding me today. While changing the tapes on the record player some of the girls started flicking through the radio channels. At one point some Punjabi bhangra music came on and I felt that all eyes were on me looking at how I would respond to this. I felt uncomfortable about the situation and tried to show no recognition that this might interest me, or that I thought it 'my kind of music', or any different from what else got*

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<sup>43</sup> Once again, there remains an emphasis on pre-determined social identities here, in contrast to the notion of ethnicity as discursively constituted during the research encounter.

*played in the club. Some of the lads seemed to be laughing and the music was quickly substituted by the girls for more regular tunes.*

What had began as a strangely cold encounter in the youth club, was later turned into a 'wind-up' in which I was implicated. However, it was Kerry (15 years) who looked around 19 years of age who was to become the primary butt of the 'wind-up'. While working in the tuck-shop I was approached by Kerry's friend, Cheryl who wanted me to follow her. The following episode became a means of using my blackness to question Kerry's whiteness.

Cheryl: Kerry wants to speak to you.

Anoop: *Who? To me?*

Cheryl: Yeah, she wants to speak to you, she's in there [points to the smoking room]

Anoop: *[hesitantly] Are you sure?*

Cheryl: Yeah, she's in there.

[Anoop enters the smoking room where a mixed group of boys and girls are sat around, upon which point the room falls quiet]

Anoop: *[to Kerry] Did you want something?*

Kerry: *[Looks embarrassed as jeering starts]* No, she's winding you up! It's a wind-up!

[Anoop exits room and returns to tuck-shop where Jeff another youth worker is present]

Jeff: What did she want? Was it a wind-up?

Anoop: *Yeah.*

Jeff: Ya see, they're windin' you up. There was an incident at the Moore Hen [a pub] ya see.

Anoop: *Why? What happened?*

Jeff: Well two of the girls went to the Moore Hen and got a bit tipsy. They got talkin' to some Asian guys who were buyin' 'em drinks, and later on they ... well, they kissed 'em. They were tipsy. Now everyone's callin' them Paki-lovers!

In this extract complex configurations of race and gender complicate what at first appears a set of innocent, unrelated, interactions (avoidance, the jokes about bhangra music, the 'wind-up'). It was precisely because of my identity as an Asian male that I could be used as a sexual mirror to reflect abuse back at Kerry as a 'paki-lover'. It was widely rumoured in the club that Kerry 'fancied' me so my introduction into the scene could become living proof that she was indeed a 'paki-lover'. In this exchange sexism and racism could combine to regulate the identities of researcher/researched. Thus, where my ethnicity may have hindered research into racism at one level (as with the young mothers group) it could engender alternative insights into young people's whiteness and the social expression of racism at another. Where I had become included in some youth club activities (football, pool, table tennis, serving in the tuck-shop, engaging in conversations) at other moments such as that above, lines of exclusion could rapidly be drawn. According to Song and Parker, this is because 'many dimensions of sameness and difference can be operating at any given moment' so that 'where two people may claim commonality on one dimension, they may fall apart on another'(1995:246). Seeing research relations as fluid, shifting tentacles of movement is informative of the limitations inherent in more static versions of the process which view social investigation as simply a matter of 'black/white'.

A prime example of this occurred when Jeff, a black youth worker at Holbury, informed me of an episode that happened when he was getting a lift back from the club with some younger male members. He told me how he had been joking around with the white lads and at one point casually referred to himself as a 'nigger'. He went on to remark how the other males interjected by saying, 'Jeff, you're not a nigger, you're one of us!' Jeff reflected on the exchange when he was with me: 'As far as I'm concerned there's only one type of nigger. I'm a nigger and you're a nigger. But to them, there's two kinds!' Jeff continued to explain how the young men, 'see me as one of them 'cos I have a laugh, joke and go for a drink with them'. Indeed, he was far less tolerant of the unspoken, institutional, racist attitudes he felt other youth workers

held and for this reason chose not to socialise with them<sup>44</sup>. Thus, black individuals may be regarded as 'niggers' at one moment and then bleached of their ethnicity the next as they become accepted within white peer-groups. This was certainly my own experience of working with white youth in Tyneside and the West Midlands. During my time at the Holbury youth club Jeff became a key ally to me, someone who could 'show me the ropes' and provide me with supplementary evidence about events that occurred (such as the 'paki-lover' incident witnessed above). In this way I was able to make a personal assessment of incidents which I either witnessed or was involved in, and then relay them back to Jeff for respondent validation. My inclusion into 'wind-ups' and the like meant I could never stand back and objectively appraise a situation as I was all too frequently implicated at both a personal and professional level. This would indicate that the way a researcher's identity is interpreted by respondents is highly significant. Thus, the 'paki-lover' and '*Buddha of Suburbia*' incidents disclose how research processes are always cross-cut, fractured and multiply aligned across the author's subjectivity. Moreover, the two selected events (there are numerous other examples) reveal how race and gender can simultaneously be 'articulated' through one another, with differing results.

This issue of mutual participation was equally apparent in the school-based research in the North East of England. When I first entered Emblevale School in Tyneside I was surrounded by a group of boys who were keen to know who I was but most especially wanted to know whether I played basketball or football. The significance of this remark is made explicit in Chapter 9. Overall, there was a 'novelty' appeal of being a researcher that meant that numbers of children happily volunteered to take part in the study (not least to escape the tedium of lessons). On the surface my appearance and general uncertainty marked me out as someone who was neither staff nor student, this is all the more blatant in schooling institutions where hierarchies are

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<sup>44</sup> While I had no immediate proof of this beyond Jeff's personal testimony, he cited the example that he would never be given the keys to the youth club despite being a longer-standing member than others who were granted this responsibility. In my year stint at the club, I waited several times outside with Jeff and other club members before another worker let us in. In this time I cannot recall him ever being given the keys, yet this gesture alone is not enough to impute a racist motive. However, on further reflection I was inclined to give credence to Jeff's narrative when I discovered that the senior youth worker who delegated these tasks held some highly dubious views on black people that he occasionally espoused to me.

tightly policed<sup>45</sup>. In many instances such as this I became the subject of enquiry whereupon I found myself having to respond to questions before I had the right to begin to ask them (Oakley, 1981). For example, when arriving in schools I was asked, 'Are you Sheila Beggum's brother?', 'You're from Liverpool aren't you?', 'Are you Miss's boyfriend?', 'How come you're interested in us?' With those students I got to know increasingly well, I could even be sought out for advice on delicate issues concerning friends, family, sexual relationships, personal problems etc. Clearly, it was impossible to present a dispassionate façade, especially when participants had been genuine and trusting with me in a way that was undeniably touching. Not to have reciprocated this warmth would have been disingenuous and undoubtedly would have hindered the ethnography.

Moreover, during group interviews I felt it was, at times, ethical to intervene in order to protect particular respondents from the racism of others. For example, in a focus group discussion at Emblevale School (comprising two white males, a white female and black student called Aisha) I was keen not to allow the 'race talk' to descend into discriminatory action. A discussion concerning where pupils lived in the locality was unexpectedly appropriated by male students when the question was transformed into an issue of national origin.

[11 years]

Carl: [To Aisha] You were born in Africa.

Aisha: Yeah, I was.

Paul: And she saw a li-on, and the li-on came forra and she hopped on the Metro and said, 'Take me to Newcastle!'

[laughter]

Anoop: [sternly] *Hey, I don't think that's what happened.*

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<sup>45</sup> I was asked to wear a visitors badge throughout my school visits. When a school secretary who was completing the name-tag asked for my name and I gave my forename I was told that this would not do as students would fail to refer to me as 'Mr'. When I replied that I was not unduly concerned by this, I was told in no uncertain terms that this would be unacceptable. However, as the teacher I worked alongside openly chose to use my forename, the regulation of a name title appeared all the more absurd.

On this occasion I felt compelled to nip the assemblage of racist stereotypes in the bud. The discourse connecting Africa with the jungle and lions was directed towards Aisha; to my mind this had to be swiftly challenged. At other moments with different group dynamics I may have opened up the discussion for further debate. In this sense, the notion of non-participatory research would have been insensitive and entirely unfeasible.

Each of the episodes, then, reveal how ethnicity is *produced* in fieldwork interactions. Furthermore, the incidents expose how researchers themselves are multiply positioned by participants in a way that requires careful reflection. Accordingly, Song and Parker (1995) have suggested that social scientists should be more attentive to the varied production of their own identities in research situations:

We would argue that more attention needs to be paid to how researchers themselves may be actively constructed and perceived by interviewees. Furthermore, researchers may feel, for various reasons, that they want to respond to positionings of themselves, and that this is an integral part of any interview dynamic (p.253).

The instability of race relations and the differing social usage of ethnicity (how it is called upon, at what moments and in what contexts) make fixed categories of racial demarcation between the researcher/researched un-quantifiable. It is precisely because researcher/researched are not unitary subjects but multiply positioned in relation to a number of identities that fieldwork will continue to announce unexpected alliances at some moments, while fracturing bonds of expected commonality at others. For these reasons I have chosen to focus on the active, discursive deployment of ethnicity in fieldwork situations, rather than become embroiled in speculating upon 'race of interviewer effects' and hypothesising on the authenticity of insider/outsider accounts.



One of the main criticisms of ethnography has been the issue of how data is collected and then transformed by way of analysis into text. Questions related to the reliability of information, the size of research sample and the 'objectivity' of the researcher are just some of the issues that have been put under the spot-light. These issues will be further discussed in the following chapter on subcultural methods. In this section I will address points related to how data is collected, interpreted and evaluated. A problematic of qualitative (and I would suggest quantitative) research concerns the methods of inquiry used to record, select, edit, organise, shape and analyse the variety of data generated. Here, I shall focus on a set of interrelated themes: the collection/selection of data; the act of interpretation; the methods used for verifying information.

Given the amount of data collected in the pursuit of ethnography, where the researcher is frequently living the ethnographic life, decisions concerning data selection can become especially difficult to make. In most instances I endeavoured to select statements from typed transcripts that could be seen to encapsulate a *kernel* of the wider issues referred to by respondents. The editing process was by no means a transparently neutral activity, neither can it be put down to mere 'random selection'. Far from being 'objective', the data selection process was critically informed by numerous readings of the transcripts and an experiential 'learned' knowledge of the participants involved, acquired from interactions in daily contexts, observations and biographical histories. As such the subjectivity of research was unavoidable, no more so than when my own identity became a point of discussion as illustrated above. Here, it became seemingly impossible to demarcate the research process from my own lived biography as the two were so completely entwined.

In many instances the rationale which guides the choice between what is included and what is not in ethnographic social science research is very much a grey area. While I

have undoubtedly made a number of unconscious decisions around the inclusion/exclusion of material I also made some stark, rational choices. For example, I chose *not* to analyse the following data: a vast bank of visual evidence I collected which included several photographs of racist graffiti; a series of video-taped group and individual interviews with young people; maps and diagrams of spatial zones; press and media material related to particular events; extensive interviews with officials. The reasons for these decisions are manifold and not least take into consideration the need to protect the identities of individuals, particular institutions and neighbourhood locales<sup>46</sup>. Like the cutting of a sculpture from stone, the granite deposits that have been removed would amount to far more in weight than the remaining structure that is this thesis.

As we saw in Chapter 2, different epistemologies and competing theoretical frameworks may be brought to bear when it comes to 'reading' qualitative data. In these circumstances, interpretation is not simply a case of black and white answers but is a complex process that Stanley (1992) has compared to a kaleidoscope of colour and movement. Here, moving position and viewing from different standpoints can create new angles and perspectives on the research data. Stanley explains, 'you look and you see one fascinating complex pattern; the light changes or you accidentally move or you deliberately shake the kaleidoscope and you see - composed by the same elements - a somewhat different pattern' (p.178). In this sense, it is important to remember that researchers are involved in both the production - and thereby construction - of various knowledges, or 'truths'. Nevertheless this perspective need not invalidate our research findings, rather it draws attention to the study as a set of 'situated' knowledges derived from particular techniques that are subject to context and situation. And yet it may still be possible to tentatively cross-validate this information in line with historiography and by recourse to the broad brushstrokes of 'triangulation'.

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<sup>46</sup> Another omission concerned the extensive repertoire of racist jokes, fights and verbal abuse collected from young people over time. At present these episodes have been collated and systematically filed to provide descriptive indicators pertaining to people and events. However, other researchers have also written about young people and popular racism (Hewitt, 1986; Cohen, 1988; Troyna & Hatcher, 1992; Connolly, 1998) though my focus here is predominantly upon whiteness.

The term *triangulation*, deriving from navigation and surveying, is a means whereby different bearings can be used to locate the particular position of an object.

Respondent validation and the use of multiple data-gathering methods were to emerge as twin techniques by which to cross-check the research findings. While it was possible on occasions to relay transcripts back to older students for clarification, editing and a systematic check on details, younger students seemed less interested seeing this activity as an extension of written school work. However, in each instance, at the level of data selection and analysis, I had extensive power over the malleability of the final text. Another means by which I attempted to avoid crude representations of young people was by welcoming the inclusion of local participants, educational practitioners and feminist researchers who acted as informed critical readers of the text. This broader appraisal of the work had a productive influence on my thinking and writing; for example local people were especially adept at validating colloquial expression, providing nuggets of historical detail and placing their individual experiences in the context of my findings. These multiple perspectives, what Audrey Kobayshi has called 'a circle of involvement' (1994:76), engendered further points of reflexivity and enabled me to better develop the research in a more inclusive, dialogic manner. As we saw previously, key informers such as Jeff could also provide background information on what may otherwise appear to be opaque incidents. Moreover, this interactive approach was in keeping with the experiential element of the research by recognising the tacit knowledge of local people when it came to the social history of regions.

The combination of multiple research methods allowed for another means of triangulation, instigating a loose series of checks and balances through which the evidence could be more carefully sifted and refined. While this may allow for some fine-grain qualitative data to emerge, it also meant that established lines of enquiry could be more easily retraced. This may be of use to the inquisitive reader who seeks a material context for the investigation and future researchers working in the area. I am at pains to stress, however, that the act of data collection/selection, interpretation and evaluation remain entirely subjective and contextually contingent. In many ways

this thesis can be accurately described as an historically-informed ethnography. As such, I draw on both primary and secondary resources including personal accounts, life-history narratives<sup>47</sup> and urban historical observations. Moreover, historiography became a particularly useful means of triangulating the contemporary participant-data that was gathered; in other words, the trajectory of the ethnographic evidence could be cross-referenced through these alternative methods of enquiry discussed previously. Thus, where the ethnographic data correlated with the historical research a more compelling argument could be sustained. Historical methods acted as a documentary index by which change and continuity could be registered and significantly, they provided potential clues to what on the surface may have appeared to be mysterious activity. I am not implying a direct 'fit' between the contemporary qualitative research conducted and the historical analysis that was carried out, rather, historiography was a technique for gauging and balancing the available ethnographic evidence. 'Weighing up' information in this way could sharpen the interpretative devices used to 'make sense' of daily experience.

There are, however, some recognised limitations to triangulation method when used in an overly rigid manner during ethnographic inquiry. As David Silverman has argued, 'the major problem with triangulation as a test of validity is that, by counterposing different contexts, it ignores the context-bound and skilful character of social interaction' (1994[1993]:158). In contrast the *flexible* forms of triangulation I adopted were not concerned with ironing out experience into two-dimensional forms of data, rather I was equally interested in capturing the unevenness of contextual responses (for example the different responses that arise when group and individual interviews are conducted). Where appropriate these contextual dynamics have been signalled in the text and may be of particular interest to the use of life-history method in Chapter 10 where both oral testimonies and written narratives were collected. Here, the contingent nature of story-telling, along with comparative differences between spoken and written accounts was revealed. Researchers should thereby show sensitivity to participant accounts as culturally embedded statements, not forms of 'hygienic' data.

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<sup>47</sup> The role of life-history method is discussed in detail in Chapter 8 prior to an analysis of the narratives.

As such, the research draws on multiple layers of insight to arrive at what are often partial and open-ended conclusions.

For Stanley (1992) accumulating layers of knowledge which may include contradictory interpretations is in itself not a problem when the act of interpretation is regarded as a dynamic social process. In this sense dissonance may be equally important as the corroborative evidence sought through triangulation. Another concern with systematic forms of triangulation is the danger of erasing experimental approaches that may lead to groundbreaking findings. Clearly, this can be highly problematic and especially brings into question the epistemological status of what some researchers regard as established masculinist, Eurocentric forms of knowledge and social inquiry. Thus, in a critique of positivism the American black feminist researcher Patricia Hill Collins has written of the academic strait-jacket whereby 'new knowledge claims must be consistent with an existing body of knowledge that the group controlling the interpretative context accepts as true' (1990:204). To avoid the ethnocentric assumptions embedded in earlier studies of race and ethnicity there is now a greater need for researchers to move beyond a white norm (Mac an Ghaill, 1988). Subsequently, Hammersley and Atkinson (1989[1983]) have warned that an over-reliance on systematic forms of triangulation can ignore the possibility that all inferences are incorrect. Indeed, where contradictory accounts do emerge dissonance may form a critical aspect of the research. Moreover, I would suggest that triangulation methods should be flexible enough to be used not just to verify information but to indicate social change and patterns of development. In this sense I did not deploy triangulation to 'get at the facts', but viewed it as technique that could be strategically deployed to shed light on what may be considered to be a mobile pattern of shifting arrangements.

## Concluding Remarks

This chapter has focused on questions of methodology (the theoretical approach and analysis of research), method (the techniques used to gather information) and epistemology (the theory of knowledge). In particular I have paid careful attention to the micro-political dynamics of the researcher/researched relationship with special reference to the social meaning of ethnicity within fieldwork. Here, I argued for a dynamic understanding of ethnicity as something that was discursively produced in the fieldwork encounter. As such, the meaning of ethnicity was contingent upon context and situation, indeed it could be said to have been produced in the fieldwork encounter. Thus, it was possible for some respondents to regard me as British, others to view me as Asian and others still, as simply a scouse Liverpudlian. The multiple occupancies meant that my ethnicity was continually being fashioned and re-fashioned according to time, circumstance and audience. This would imply that forms of 'racial matching' are unreliable methods for ascertaining a particular alliance between researcher/researched as research is above all a process. Indeed, the fragmented subjectivities of the researcher/researched and the way identities are discursively constituted during fieldwork encounters mean alliances based on 'sameness' are always contingent and temporal. Moreover, many research relations are entirely unpredictable. While some respondents may open-up to interviewers of whatever background, others may not. Even so, where participants do draw up lines of differentiation between themselves and the researcher, this too can induce valuable information. Rather than seeing one account as implicitly better than the other, researchers should be self-reflexive about the ways in which sameness and difference shape the process of study. Such a move would bring whiteness into clearer view and allow ethnic minority researchers to relinquish at least some of the representative burden of forever accounting for their ethnicities. As such, I found notions of sameness and difference to be contextually contingent where it was possible to make alliances with young people at one moment - for example in relation to sport, social class or age - and relinquish them the next, often when racist boundaries were drawn up. The multiple subjectivities of the researcher/researched meant that points of commonality and difference were continually being negotiated and replayed in the ever-moving field of research relations.

In Chapter 4 we will continue to address methodological concerns and in particular there will be a focus on the use of subcultural methods. These methods have been utilised throughout the thesis and were to become a primary technique through which white youthful ethnicities could be examined. The chapter highlights the scope, purposes and underlying rationale of the research; it considers the relationship the work has to other research in the field and its significance; and finally it addresses the suitability of the methods of investigation deployed. Furthermore, the chapter functions as a micro-history of post-war British subculture to contextualise the ensuing subcultural and ethnographic analysis. Here, it is argued that a noticeable absence in this work has been the extent to which there has been a near-complete lack of appreciation for the ethnicities of white youth. Although racism filtered into many of the earlier accounts its relationship to whiteness and the production of white identities have yet to be explored. The thesis hopes to go some way to remedying the lacunae; as such, it is a study of the 'making' of white cultural identity amongst contemporary British youth, based in two English districts. The fourth chapter explains why I chose to draw upon subcultural methods and the advantages and disadvantages of deploying such an approach. The work engages with contemporary methodological debates related to the masculinism of research; the value of insider/outsider accounts; the use of Marxist, feminist and postmodernist epistemologies; the role of embodiment. A rigorous discussion of these themes is undertaken to enable a clearer understanding of the place the research has in the broader field of race, ethnicity and subcultural studies of youth.

# **Subcultural Methods and Ethnographic Research**

## **Chapter 4**



## Introduction

The chapter considers the history of post-war British subcultures in order to provide a suitable context for our contemporary study of white ethnicity amongst young people. Here, the focus is on previous studies of subculture, their epistemological status and the types of methods and techniques that have been deployed in the study of youth. The work builds upon the methodological discussion in the previous chapter where the focus was on the social meaning of ethnicity and the subjectivity of the researcher/researched. Here, we also discussed the construction of knowledge by disclosing how data is gathered, interpreted and evaluated. In this chapter we will begin by documenting the value of subcultural methods to an analysis of white youthful ethnicities. We will then examine the various epistemological approaches employed in the study of youth subcultures and demonstrate how recourse to a particular research paradigm shapes the final analysis. Finally, we will outline the variety of subcultural methods deployed by youth researchers and appraise their merits.

The term subculture has been used in various ways in sociological analyses since its inception in the 1940s; hence the multiple references to sub/youth/counter-cultures<sup>48</sup>. Originally subculture was a definition imposed on underground groups who had a distinct set of cultural practices that marked them out from the rest of society. These differences were most apparent in style, language, argot, and dress codes. At times subcultures can be seen to provide an alternative system of values, incompatible with those of the majority-society; for example, Hippy communes or the Rastafarian lifestyle ideology of Jah. These communities were often referred to as 'counter-cultures' since they were thought to offer a hegemonic challenge to the values, beliefs and social practices of 'mainstream' society<sup>49</sup>. More recently, subcultural terms have been used by academics to divide groups into easily identifiable categories. An example of this can be found in Mac an Ghaill's (1988) educational study of black

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<sup>48</sup> For further discussion of the concept see Gelder & Thornton (Eds.) (1997).

<sup>49</sup> A contemporary example of such an alternative community would be Eco-Warriors and New Age Travellers. These groups were harangued in the nineties by the former Prime Minister John Major when he remarked, 'New Age Travellers? Not in this age, not in any age'.

youth where three subcultural groups are identified - the Black Sisters, the Rasta Heads and the Warriors. Meanwhile, Mary Fuller (1982[1981]:283)) in her study of black girls in a London Comprehensive, found the term useful to draw attention to how 'very few features of the sub-culture on their own were unique to the girls, although the specific configuration of values, attitudes and behaviour and self-perceptions did mark them out as quite distinct ...'.

Our research draws on both the conventional use of subculture (as a stigmatised, underground group with socially marginalised values) and more fluid applications of the term (a sub-division with a 'configuration of values'). Thus, Chapter 5 comprises of a study of Skinhead youth, the subculture *par excellence*. Elsewhere, Chapter 8 identifies two intra-ethnic subcultural groups in the North East, the Real Geordies the Charver Kids. Finally, in Chapter 9 we turn our attention to a group of white mavericks - B-Boyz, Wiggers, Wannabes and White Negroes - who express an open desire to become black. These labels were not sociological typologies I ascribed to respondents to 'make sense' of the groups involved but were internally generated by participants themselves or in the case of the latter group were derived from other youth. As such, the term 'subculture' has been extended to include counter-cultural groups, social 'deviants', minority sub-groups and more familiar youth segments such as Punks, Teds, Greasers, Goths, Mods and Rockers. But as I shall now explain, re-thinking subculture has been one facet of this research.

#### *Why use subcultural methods?: Towards new youthful discursive clusters*

The popular usage of the term subculture has tended to imply that young people's lives can adequately be explained purely at the level of subcultural activity (style, music tastes, argot). Here, they are nothing more than the living embodiment of the subcultures they come to represent. Thus, we may consider the inflammatory media reports and cruder subcultural studies of youth that have led to such socially recognisable 'types' as the hell-bent football hooligan, the angry Punk, the ecstasy driven Raver. Such representations have served to condense the lived experiences of these youth by removing them from the immediate and intimate social contexts of

everyday family and growing up. Furthermore such approaches have also tended to ignore the vast majority of young people who do not subscribe to an explicit subculture in any meaningful way. Subsequently, the notion of subculture has been criticised for indicating that there is a 'mainstream' of conformist youth and a counter-cultural subset of radical individuals who have chosen an alternative mode of expression (Gelder & Thornton, 1997).

My own usage of the term subculture recognises youthful social collectivities as multifaceted 'discursive clusters'. This definition counters the tendency to see youth subcultures as rigidly structured and monolithic, hermetically-sealed formations. Furthermore, I found that while some young people positioned themselves as subcultural members in one context, they did not always do so in another. Thus, many youth admitted that they were influenced by aspects of Charver style for example, but did not construe themselves as 'true' Charver Kids (whoever they may be) thereby indicating the *partiality* of contemporary subcultural experiences. Here, the contingency of subcultural affiliation was seen, this aspect casts a long shadow of doubt regarding the supposed authenticity of youth subcultures themselves. In his analysis of subculture in the work of Henry Mayhew, Andrew Tolson draws attention to the tendency to look for 'types' and so construct characters that can be said to be 'representative'. He argues:

Social identities are not really *constructed* in this type of interview, they are presupposed. They are defined in terms of an individual already possessing a certain role or status ... which provides a prior qualification from which to speak [original emphasis](1990:19).

My preferred usage of the term 'discursive clusters' to explain the experience of youthful subcultural allegiance is an attempt to avoid the crass forms of typification that has at times pervaded subcultural ethnographies. In this sense, the term subculture should not be read as a fixed, stable and determining point of existence around which young people's lives are organised but rather may be seen as a transitional and nebulous moment of becoming. This re-definition of subculture

favours a more fluid and fragmented understanding of the multiple subjectivities of young people in contrast to the uni-dimensional portraits proffered in earlier subcultural analyses.

This thesis, somewhat unexpectedly for the author, has been heavily influenced by British post-war theories of subculture. This may appear somewhat surprising given the receding use of subculture as a method for youth analysis<sup>50</sup>. Indeed, the critique of subculture is so extensive that one hesitates from using the term itself (I actually considered blander, less pejorative terms such as 'case studies' but now wish to acknowledge the value and changing history of subcultural studies)<sup>51</sup>. This begs the question, how did a subcultural sceptic such as myself - with all the hindsight of past criticisms - come to use these methods as the prime means of documenting and explaining young people's situated responses to whiteness? When I began this project it seemed a daunting task to engage with something as normative, yet invisible as whiteness. However, the study of youth subculture provided a methodological apparatus with which to view the constitution of white ethnicity. Rather like the act of pencil-shading over the second-page imprint of a text that has been already removed, subcultural methods offer a frozen trace of an ever escaping whiteness. Indeed, it was through subcultural practices that white ethnicity could become fleetingly intelligible. However, what remains in these traces was not a crisp 'truth' about whiteness, instead I was left with a series of sketches, a scribbled imprint, a smudged outline. Moreover, this residue of whiteness, precisely because of the oblique formation of youth subculture, needed to be 'decoded' and analysed. Again, there remained scope for interpretation especially when some contours appear less lucid than others; at these points I have attempted to make a considered, subjective assessment in line with the evidence available.

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<sup>50</sup> The latest 1998-1999 round of funding on the cities programme by the Economic and Social Science Research Council allocated resources to statistical and quantitative studies of youth in preference to qualitative research involving interviews, subcultural methods and ethnographic analysis.

<sup>51</sup> Recently, Andy Bennett (1999) has called for the term subculture to be abandoned in favour for the concept of 'neo-tribes'. However, I see the problem resting less with the actual terminology of subculture as a word and more with its social usage as it currently stands. Moreover, by placing my research alongside earlier subcultural studies I hope that these differences will become clearer to understand.

The thesis investigates four subcultural responses to whiteness and considers the broader practice of white ethnicity. A whole chapter is devoted to the Kempton Dene Skins, a Midlands-based male gang who took up a staunch posture of white English nationalism. In many ways the Skinheads exemplified the exigencies of white masculinity as they came to mark out the extremities of white ethnicity. The other three subcultures are all based in the Tyneside conurbation of Northeast England and comprise of the Real Geordies, the Charver Kids and Wiggers. Each of these subcultural styles was formed in relation with the local economic infrastructure and, significantly, these collective identities were defined through and against one another. The study of subculture was, then, a pivotal technique for revealing the mutable experience of whiteness amongst young people. Here, white identities were found to be variously enacted, moreover, they were subject to differing engagements with ethnicity. Thus, while some English subcultures attempted to invoke quintessential notions of whiteness (for instance, the Skins and Real Geordies) others chose to reject these in favour of a cool, black pose (effected notably by the B-Boyz, Wiggers and other white 'wannabes'). Furthermore, other subcultures such as the Charver Kids were excluded from the category 'white' or at best, were relegated to the peripheries. As we shall go on to see, each of these responses to white ethnicity was not without drawbacks. Nevertheless, subcultural methods suggest that monolithic assumptions of whiteness are no longer tenable as new forms of white ethnicity come into being. A function of this thesis is to uncover new subject positions for white youth in the prevailing English situation.

### *Subculture, social class and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies*

Post-war British subcultural studies of youth have expertly drawn attention to the complex interplay of social class in young people's life experience. This approach was in contrast to American 'gang' studies of teenage 'delinquency' that were culturally specific and favoured a morbid fascination with 'deviancy'. As <sup>Cohen</sup> Stanley [1972] sociological critiques of the very notion of deviancy began to emerge

(1973) applied these new 'transactional'<sup>52</sup> ideas to an analysis of Mods and Rockers in south-east England between 1963-66. For Cohen, the public reaction to these youth subcultures was connected to broader 'moral panics' that frequently tended to scapegoat young people by representing them as contemporary, national 'folk devils'. Instead, British post-war subcultural theorists began to see these social groups not as youthful formations to be cajoled and nursed back into line but rather as critical segments of society which contained the seeds of resistance and working-class empowerment.

Writers from the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), who remain some of the most eloquent exponents of youth cultures to date, have tended to discuss Skinhead style, for example, in terms of working-class resistance and generation differentiation. The class-generation dynamic that helps fashion youth subculture remains pertinent where Skinhead style may be read as 'a reaction against the contamination of the parent culture by middle class values' (Cohen, P. 1972:24). This approach has tended to emphasise the social-class location of young men and, to a lesser degree, has tentatively considered the ways in which masculinities operate within these peer-group settings. For CCCS writers in the mid-1970s investments in Skinhead style were thought to have little to do with securing whiteness, instead, these actions were viewed as 'rituals of resistance'. Here, the retrospective harking back to a bygone 'golden age' was said to offer therapeutic comfort against harsh economic realities, where a 'magical recovery' of community is evoked:

Our basic thesis about the Skinheads centres around the notion of community. We would argue that the Skinhead style represents an attempt to re-create through the 'mob' the traditional working class

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<sup>52</sup> Stan Cohen explains the key difference between early notions of 'deviancy' and transactional responses: 'The older tradition was *canonical* in the sense that it saw the concepts it worked with as authoritative, standard, accepted, given and unquestionable. The new tradition is sceptical in the sense that when it sees terms like "deviant", it asks "deviant to whom"? or "deviant from what"?; when told that something is a social problem, it asks "problematic to whom?"; when certain conditions or behaviour are described as dysfunctional, embarrassing, threatening or dangerous, it asks "says who?" and "why"?'. In other words, these concepts and descriptions are not assumed to have a taken-for-granted status (1973:12).

community, as a substitution for the real decline of the latter. The underlying social dynamic for style, in this light, is the relative worsening of the situation of the working class ...(Clarke, 1976:99).

These comments have powerful resonance for interpreting the actions of Skinhead youth today, as we shall see in Chapter 5, where a consistent erosion of the manufacturing base has led to a rapid decline in unskilled manual labour. The closure of large factories in the West Midlands and the disintegration of apprenticeship schemes has undoubtedly affected the employment situation of many working-class males. This in part may explain the Skinheads' obsession with colonising 'territory' (shops, streets, bus stops, the local youth club) by way of response. Similarly, in the Northeast of England the rapid de-scaling of the workforce and the progressive shift from manual to service-based industries is a tension that may be temporally resolved by young men through their immersion within 'Geordie' subcultures. Here, it is at the symbolic levels of the imaginary, that local, white working-class males may seek to accrue the identity of the 'hard' Geordie male outside the confines of the workplace (see Chapters 6, 8).

For the early CCCS writers, heavily influenced by Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches, subcultural practices were thought to be the reaction of working-class youth to unbridled post-war consumerism and a sharply visible, unequal distribution of wealth. Consequently, John Clarke (1974) claims Skinheads had a 'subordinated view' of their situation where 'acceptance of racial scapegoating ... displaced antagonisms from their real structural sources' (p.279). A feature of these perspectives was a tendency for researchers to subsume the complex, lived experience of working-class lifestyles within a sometimes-rigid Marxist theoretical framework. An extreme example of this influence can be found in Pearson's sociological study of 'paki-bashing' in which the researcher expands upon his fragmentary observations to provide an all-encompassing economic thesis:

Only if we enter into the heart of working class life can we understand these beliefs and actions. 'Paki-bashing' is a primitive form of political and economic struggle. It is an inarticulate and finally impotent attempt to act directly on the conditions of the market - whether the exchange value which is contested concerns housing, labour power or girls (1976:69).

This 'ruling ideas'<sup>53</sup> framework acts as a grand narrative that attempts to incorporate complex and diverse social phenomena (violence, sexual politics, racism) within a complete and over-arching philosophy. In this analysis, the 'impotent' Skins occupy a castrated/subordinate masculinity vis-à-vis their socio-economic location, the anger for which is displaced into violent outbursts. Here, the Skins are shadow-boxers *extraordinaire*, flexing their muscles in choreographic displays, without ever altering their 'real' social class situation. But there is more to this than mere shadow-boxing as the perspectives of 'paki-bashing' victims would no doubt inform<sup>54</sup>. In these earlier studies, the elaboration of a politics of social class was often at the expense of issues of masculinity, racism and whiteness.

Rather than treating white, racist activities as the pointless stretching of symbolic sinew, my own research suggests that such practices aid the mutual consolidation of masculinity, sexuality and white ethnicity in working-class culture. Indeed, the overly rational economic account does not capture the deeper motivations for exhibiting whiteness. It does not adequately explain, for example, why it is *young men* who are engaged in such hostile actions, or why not *all* working class males synthesise a racist white identity. Furthermore, there remains an absence of individual agency in these accounts which allows Pearson to conclude his analysis with the romantic notion of what he calls the 'mis-directed heroism of the "paki-basher"' (1976a:86). This nostalgic portrayal of (male) working-class heroes depicts them as passive victims of the State, acting under a 'mis-directed' *false consciousness*. I would suggest that Skinhead style can be said to be a ritual of resistance for sure, but its reactionary

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<sup>53</sup> I am grateful to Richard Johnson for the use of this term. It is drawn from the Marxist notion that the ideas of the ruling class are, in every epoch, the ruling ideas.

<sup>54</sup> Although several interviews were conducted with the victims of racist violence, Chapter 4 focuses on the thoughts and actions of the perpetrators. Chapter 8 documents the subordinated experiences of whiteness lived out by black, Asian and other ethnic minority individuals.



effects are too easily explained away. The romanticism associated with violence that researchers have imputed to male working-class cultures has served only to produce an imaginary 'noble savage', the much patronised white, working-class hero (Collier, 1998). This modern 'savage', however, was not an inhabitant of darkest Africa, but a resident of the concrete jungle that posed as inner-city Britain. A further consequence of this romanticism has been a tendency to ignore difference within working-class formations of gender, sexuality, age, region etc. Indeed, in Chapter 8 I go on to demonstrate how intra-class, racialised differences are central to an understanding of working-class situations. Furthermore, the studies undertaken in Tyneside and the West Midlands show how regional identity can be deployed accordingly in each location. A novel aspect of this thesis is the attention paid to the whiteness of subculture and the spatial dynamics inherent in subcultural practices. Inter-spatial ethnic differences between regions and locales, as well as intra-spatial differences (town and country, metropolitan or suburban) are of key interest here.

#### *'Anti-oppressive' and postmodernist subcultural approaches*

Since the mid-seventies publication of the CCCS collection *Resistance through Rituals* - which drew on Antonio Gramsci's dynamic concept of power as a hegemonic contestation involving negotiation, resistance and accommodation - there have been two other significant approaches to subculture which derive from an 'anti-oppressive', and later postmodernist tradition. Where the former have attempted to foreground the subordinated identities of girls, women and ethnic minorities (for example McRobbie, 1991; Griffin, 1985; Fuller, 1982; Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Mirza, 1992), the latter have sought to fragment, disperse and question notions of subcultural identity altogether. Thus, Steve Redhead (1990:25) insists that 'authentic subcultures' were 'produced by the sub-cultural theorists, not the other way round' (1990:25). In his later work Redhead (1995) has emphasised the disintegration of homogenous youth subcultures in case studies of dance music and clubculture. Indeed, in my research I have stressed the contingency of subculture and have conceptualised these youthful formations in terms of being *discursive clusters*. In this reading young people can discursively position themselves - or be strategically located by the discourses of others - in a tenuous fashion as 'subcultural members'.

However, the contingency of these relations only serves to expose the inauthentic nature of most youth subcultures as they are popularly understood in media, press and some sociological accounts of young people's lifestyles.

A defining component of the *anti-oppressive* subcultural response has been to argue that the formation of race, ethnicity and gender are structurally central to the experience of young people's coming-of-age. Here, Marxist models for the analysis of youth emphasise the determining aspects of economic forces along with the primacy of social class. This reconsideration of anti-oppressive subcultural research demanded a re-formulation of economic analyses sensitive to the growing attention paid towards processes of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity in social science research. Indeed, a number of subcultural theorists were clearly fascinated by the politics of race and class so strikingly embodied in the style of Rastafari in the 70s and 80s (Hebdige, 1977; Barrett 1977, Garrison, 1979). Later, the act of 'making visible' these hitherto under-researched areas, became a political project in itself. However, the rush to expose the hidden histories of subordinate groups (e.g. black youth, working-class girls) through ethnographic research has at times led to an accentuation of difference which inadvertently declares these subcultures as 'Other'. For example, black (especially African-Caribbean) youth are now vigorously over-represented in British sociological and educational research; an emphasis that in turn implies that there is something exciting, problematic or 'deviant' about their ethnicities that requires such thorough investigation<sup>55</sup>.

Another unintended consequence of the anti-oppressive ethnographic approach has been the emergence of an academic, reactionary response to working class, masculine styles of culture. In a most recent collection, Phil Cohen discusses the irony of this predicament: 'By the end of the 1970s the romantic idealisation of 'the lads' (alias white male working-class youth) had begun to give way to its opposite - an all too ready denunciation of their inherent and irredeemable racism and sexism' (1997:11).

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<sup>55</sup> One may compare this with the lack of attention paid in youth studies to white migrant groups such as the Irish who remain England's largest migrant group.

Cohen goes on to declare how anti-racist and feminist critiques of white working-class culture throughout the eighties began to resonate with New Right expressions of class in a mutual coalition which heralded a 'new Yob culture' (p.11). In contrast, my thesis aims to keep in place a tension which recognises the subordinated existence of many white, working-class males, while avoiding the rose-tinted tendency to equate their hostilities with an heroic, economic resistance.

In contrast, postmodernist approaches to subculture have asserted that such youth formations are organised as much through commercial enterprise as in 'resistance' to the capitalist economy. This is in direct contrast to studies such as T.R. Fyvel's (1964) analysis of Teddy boys in which he portrayed them as 'Rebellious youth in the welfare state'. Postmodernist theories have been critical of the homogenous 'groupings' of youth cults and have stressed the hybrid interactions of British youth culture: the Punks who enjoyed reggae, or the 'indie'/dance cross-over scene in Manchester during the late-eighties for instance. The postmodernist influence also provides a new way of interpreting the changing morphology of club cultures, or the 'virtual realities' evoked when 'surfing' the net, using home entertainment systems or interacting on-line through new media technologies of communication (Robins, 1996). In each of these cases, previous subcultural definitions of 'identity' and 'community' have come under scrutiny. Another strand familiar to postmodernist approaches concerns the playful notion of parody, imitation and the 'carnavalesque'. A prime example of masquerade as a transgressive technique can be found in the use of 'drag' costume on the gay scene and how this may come to incite a proliferation of sexual identities (Butler, 1990).

Moreover, there is a parodic element to most subcultures which is in part a pastiche of earlier generations, as seen in the 'flower-power' Acid House revellers of the late-eighties and the contemporary Mod-inspired, Britpop youth of the nineties. The influence of a stylistic fusion, or 'bricolage', can be traced in earlier youth cults too, such as the Edwardian-inspired Teds or the later New Romantics who borrowed heavily from the aristocratic exuberance of the Restoration period. Subsequently,

Simon Frith (1983) in his writings about youth and music has commented on Skinhead style as a burlesque form of caricature.

The skinheads, for example, took on the look of the cartoon lumpen worker - shaved head as a sign of stupidity, work boots as a sign of drudgery, body moving clumsily as a sign of brute force, dumb surliness as a sign of menace. The whole ensemble was a proletarian caricature of a bourgeois joke (p.219).

A sense of 'caricature' can be felt in other youth subcultures as well. Thus, where the Skinheads provided an exaggerated depiction of the manual labourer, the Mods applied a smooth polish to the image of the neatly attired office-worker which made them 'a little *too* smart, somewhat *too* alert' (Hebdige, 1987[1979]:52) for 'mainstream' society. In postmodernist readings of style, subculture is as much about parody, mixing and creative innovation, as it is about blunt socio-economic resistance.

As such, both the anti-oppressive and postmodernist approaches to youth provide fresh critiques of the earlier, somewhat static notions of subculture. The anti-oppressive emphasis on the 'invisible' cultural identities of girls and minority youth highlights how subcultures can no longer be treated as homogenous, hermetically sealed categories, the sole preserve of white working-class boys. Meanwhile, the postmodernist shift from seeing subculture through the economic lens of production, labour relations and employment, has led to more refined interpretations of consumption, community and that most stickiest of issues, 'identity'. While these criticisms are of value, the previous CCCS essays on post-war British subculture still provide some of the most invigorating, theoretically conscious and detailed portraits of youth styles, the influence of which can certainly be felt in this study. Moreover, where the CCCS evidence for 'resistance' appears sketchy and theory-led at the level of the textual or symbolic, I found this concept especially meaningful at the empirical level of the ethnographic in my own work.

### *Subculture, masculinism and methodology*

In recent years a somewhat misleading dichotomy has emerged in social science investigation that purports quantitative methods to be 'masculine' and qualitative methods to be 'feminine'. While there is nothing inherently gendered about the use of either of these techniques, at the level of discourse this binary is repeatedly evoked either explicitly (in what counts as 'objective', 'rigorous' research) or implicitly (in the designation of so-called 'hard' and 'soft' data, or the value ascribed to the 'size of sample'). While I shall be drawing on some additional quantitative data this thesis is primarily a qualitative study firmly grounded in the ethnographic tradition. However, the suggestion that qualitative methods are 'feminine' and thereby void of any form of masculinism will be emphatically put to the test. As David Morgan asserts, 'Qualitative methodology and ethnography after all has its own brand of *machismo* with its image of the male sociologist bringing back news from the fringes of society, the lower depths, the mean streets, areas traditionally "off limits" to women investigators' (1981:86-87). In what follows I shall address the issue of masculinism in ethnographic and subcultural research and indicate my personal struggle to avoid replicating the 'machismo' Morgan identifies.

In the preface to his sociological study of comparative youth cultures Michael Brake (1993) remarks how, 'On the whole, youth cultures and subcultures tend to be some form of exploration of masculinity. They are therefore masculinist ...' (p.ix). Here, the author appears to conflate engagements with the subject of masculinity, with the presumption that such studies are thereby 'masculinist'. In contrast I would like to distinguish between ethnographic studies about boys, which until recently *have* been largely masculinist, from critical endeavours into the study of masculinities (Connell, 1987,1995; Mac an Ghail, 1997). In short, there is a crucial difference between researching boys and researching masculinities. In my own research I found that youth subcultures tended to be either all-male collectivities or if not then they remained dominated by young men. Thus, I see my own research into white masculinities as part of an extensive project about gendering whiteness that has been

informed as much by feminist theories as by the literature on race, ethnicity and postcolonialism. Here, the aim is not to 'get white boys off the hook' by reclaiming their status as the vanguard of a new 'victimhood', nor is it to depict them as the forerunners of popular radicalism. Instead, my analysis has sought to interrogate white masculinities; this process has encouraged these once monolithic identities to fragment and splinter at various points. The thesis is not, then, a celebration of white manhood, but rather is a step in the direction of a critically informed ethnic and gender-sensitive engagement with white masculinities.

The issue of masculinism has dogged subcultural theory since its inception and has continued to dominate British research in the area up until the late 1970s and early 1980s. Feminist critiques of subcultural theory have criticised the implicit and even explicit identifications male researchers made with their all-male research groups. This homosocial act, itself a form of male bonding, was to see the experience of white working class boys come to be representative of 'youth'. Consequently, the lives of girls and minority groups were treated as marginal and peripheral within these accounts. Central to this is the masculinism embedded in subcultural techniques, indeed, at least two of my subcultural research groups (the Skinheads and the Real Geordies) were exclusively male and those that weren't remained male dominated. While I had intended to get an approximate balance between male and female respondents this proved far harder in practice through a subcultural method. In order to access a greater number of responses from girls and young women I found myself relinquishing subcultural techniques to deploy other methods of analysis including some single-sex focus groups, individual interviews, historiography and the use of narrative and biographical methods. Although I had unintentionally begun to replicate a male subcultural focus, I did not want to reproduce the early, inherent masculinism associated with the method. One way in which this was averted was through the use of a life-history method in Chapter 10 which includes a number of detailed portraits concerned with feminine cultural identities. Life history provides a useful counter-point to the previous chapters which examine whiteness in male dominated subcultures. Another strategy for combating masculinism involved gendering the accounts of male respondents. In particular I chose to make white

masculinities problematic rather than allow them to remain the norm. This marks a shift in previous subcultural studies that have rarely addressed the gendered and ethnic configurations of able-bodied, heterosexual, young, white, working-class males.

Despite the multitude of British youth studies, Mary Fuller (1982) has remarked on the masculinism and whiteness embedded in the analyses of subcultural theorists.

Their efforts have been almost exclusively concentrated on white sub-cultures ... the balance being heavily towards male (and white) adolescent experiences and cultural expressions. In other words not only does this tradition in sociology treat the world of adolescence as essentially male, but it also considers adolescents to be racially undifferentiated (p.270).

Since Fuller's remarks, there have been a series of 'anti-oppressive' subcultural studies that have begun to challenge the white masculinism of research, as we shall go on to discuss. However, a cursory glance through the existing sociological literature on youth reveals a distinct lack of engagement with the ethnicities of young, white people. This study hopes to go some way towards redressing this imbalance. For as Avtar Brah (1993:134) remarks, 'Racialization of white subjectivity is often not manifestly apparent to white groups because "white" is a signifier of dominance, but this renders the racialization process no less significant'. Indeed, the omission of masculinity and whiteness from debates about youth is a feature of a Right-wing doctrine that construes working-class males as 'hooligans'. Robert Hollands (1990:140) perceptively highlights this absence: 'What is so odd about the hooligan ideology is that two of its main elements - the affirmation of working-class masculine identities and its peculiarly white ethnic character are rarely mentioned or addressed'.

The feminist critique of subcultural studies has impacted upon the work of a number of male ethnographers. Some have maintained a diplomatic silence in the wake of

these enquiries, others have gone on the defensive and a few have become self-reflexive with regard to the disclosure of personal methodologies. In a retrospective of the book *Knuckle Sandwich* (Robins & Cohen, 1978), a tale of urban, working-class life, Phil Cohen reconsiders the gender-specificity of the collaborative work.

The book is subtitled *Growing Up in the Working-Class City*, but it was largely preoccupied with mapping the cultural geography of adolescent masculinity and girls' place within it, rather than privileging their own separate points of view. Not surprisingly the book was lambasted by feminists for its masculinist standpoint. Even though we had definitely not celebrated the laddish culture of violence which we described, we had certainly failed to frame it with an equally strongly weighted account of working-class cultures of femininity (1997:87).

The feature of most post-war subcultural studies up until the 1980s was how the specificity of masculine experience came to stand in for a generalised notion of working-class culture. As early as 1975, McRobbie and Garber noted how 'the very term "sub-culture" has acquired such strong masculine overtones' (1977:211). Elsewhere, other feminist writers have commented on the way 'Such work unconsciously equated "youth" with young men and thus also lacked any comprehensive analysis of the lives of girls, the constitution of feminine and masculine subjectivity, or gender power relations' (Valentine, *et.al.*, 1998).

But the problem of girls' invisibility within subculture may not rest entirely with masculinist ascription. There are spatial dynamics which are not wholly unrelated to gender. While most subcultural studies explore the public terrain of leisure spaces, streets and youth clubs, girls may in fact be negotiating a private subculture at home that is cemented through make-up routines, a fascination for teen-magazines, dancing/listening to particular records and 'girl-talk'<sup>56</sup>. In an 'ethnographic and feminist account' of New Wave Girls, Blackman (1997) found that entering the

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<sup>56</sup> However, Griffin (1993) has pointed out that the 'public' and 'private' spheres are themselves interrelated and drawn attention to the dangers of pathologising young women as simply domestic inhabitants.



domestic-setting when girls were 'skiving' (truanting), or engaged in sleep-overs, was a means by which data could be collected in safe spaces that were sensitive to the particular interaction of these female friendship groups. Equally, while the male 'gang' represents a formative institution in the symbolic transition to manhood for many young men, McRobbie and Garber (1977) have indicated that girls may experiment with their gender identities in alternative arenas. Due to the structural relationships that women have with domesticity, these writers have pointed to the centrality of a 'culture of the bedroom' (1977:213) when it comes to the production of teenage femininities<sup>57</sup>. In female friendship groups, the 'best friend' may be a more significant influence than the collective, competitive pull associated with the male 'gang'. Homosocial male rituals such as going to football matches or the pub may further compound a 'culture of domesticity', that relegates sections of young women to the private realm. Moreover, when girls do engage in subcultural activity which involves experimentation with drugs, alcohol, sex or violence, say, they may be less likely to publicly brag about these accounts for fear of usurping the stringently sexist codes of teenage femininity (Canaan, 1986; Lees, 1986, 1993). In other words, the very actions which may be read as a positive assertion of masculinity and 'growing-up' for young men may have negative consequences for the social and sexual lives and reputations of young women.

This raises a further question about gender: are girls ever active in the public spectacle of subculture? Closer inspection reveals that many girls certainly do insert themselves into subcultures - including Punks, Goths and Ravers - though they may do so in different ways to their male counterparts. Even in an aggressively masculine subculture such as that of the Skinheads there is evidence of female participation, this is seen in the striking Skinhead girls of the 1970s who adopted feather-cut hairstyles as they began to re-position that once iconic symbol of working-class masculinity, the Doc Marten boot. In Daniel and McGuire's (1972) early monograph of an East End Skinhead gang known as the Collinwood, the emphasis is solely on male respondents, yet group members themselves refer to the presence of female Skins. As one Collinwood member reported, 'Even the birds used to go round and beat the blokes

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<sup>57</sup> This issue is further discussed in Chapter 9.

up, we see two birds one day with a shorter crop than ours' (p.34). Also, in Richard Allen's Skinhead fiction novels of the 1970s, which were renowned for their macho bravado, volumes entitled *Skinhead Girls*, *Sorts* and *Knuckle Girls* were readily available implying the potential existence of a female subcultural readership. Meanwhile, in her study of 'girl gangs', Isabel Walter (1998) interviewed an ex-Skinhead girl who used the subcultural style to reject a passive femininity. She notes how girl gangs challenged 'institutional heterosexuality' by developing 'alternative routes to status and power favouring qualities such as physical strength, fighting ability and independence from men' [original emphasis] (1998:8). Notwithstanding, some girls may use subculture precisely to confirm a heterosexual alliance with boyfriends as Helena Wulff (1995:72) found when looking at interracial female friendships, thus, 'When one of the white girls went out with a Skinhead for a while, she regarded herself as a Skinhead'. Alternatively, one of Murray Healey's (1996:149) gay male interviewees briefly mentions being stylistically influenced by his elder, tomboy sister who had taken up Skin style with sharp aplomb!

The varied response to subculture by young women indicates that a detailed analysis of femininity may require a methodological re-conceptualisation of youth.

It may, then, be a matter, not of the absence or presence of girls in sub-cultures, but of a whole alternative network of responses and activities through which girls negotiate their relation to the sub-cultures or even make positive moves away from the subcultural option (McRobbie & Garber, 1977).

In response, the early eighties witnessed feminist studies of girls and women as a challenge to the accepted orthodoxy of subculture as an inherently masculine pursuit. However, as Stanley and Wise (1983) have commented in their study of epistemology, a more radical perspective is required than simply including women within research - this perspective would entail challenging the masculinist values of the research process itself. Research into what Angela McRobbie (1997) has called, 'different, youthful subjectivities' gradually came to the fore in this period, where

gender and ethnicity began to compete with social class for primacy in British youth-based studies<sup>58</sup>. Examples of such anti-oppressive research include Christine Griffin's (1985) educational study, *Typical Girls*; Anna Pollert's (1981) work-place excavation, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*; Mairtin Mac an Ghaill's (1988) school-based study of Asian and African-Caribbean youth, *Young, Gifted and Black*; Angela McRobbie's speculative research on teenage femininities (1991); Sue Lees's (1986) work with adolescent girls called *Losing Out*; Mary Fuller's (1982) study of black girls in the comprehensive system; Anne Campbell's (1984) volume, *Girls in the Gang*.

### *Queering subculture*

Gay and lesbian subcultures ... are subjected to compulsory heterosexual norms, except where they can carve out spaces for their own rules and practices. Both re-negotiate their subordinate position within their subculture, jockeying for self-esteem and alternative forms of status. (Thornton, 1997:4).

Another aspect that is tangential to the masculinism of subcultural ethnographies is the paucity of information on sexual diversity. As Michael Brake is keen to point out, 'Youth culture has been male dominated and predominantly heterosexual, thus celebrating masculinity and excluding girls to the periphery' (1993:29). In a recent collection concerning the cultural geographies of youth, Skelton and Valentine (1998) bemoan the way subcultural studies have prioritised the lives of heterosexual young people. Surprisingly, they admit that they themselves were unable find contributions concerning gay and lesbian youth for their edition and remark how the 'ways in which young lesbian and gay people live their lives is an unresearched area' (1998:24). While this is somewhat of an exaggeration (c.f. Trenchard & Warren, 1984; Goggin, 1993; Mac an Ghaill, 1991, 1994), there can be no denying the way heterosexuality is privileged in most subcultural accounts, with detailed studies of homophobia few and far between (c.f. Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Indeed, the American edited collection *The Gay Teen* (1997) provides pointers for a psychological discussion of the area and

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<sup>58</sup> Recently, Vanessa Walters's (1996) book *Rude Girls*, a tale of black female friendship in the face of Yardie culture, has received media coverage, primarily as it was written by a young black woman of 19 years.

Humphreys's (1970) book the *Tearoom Trade*, (though not a youth study) remains a renowned analysis of the 'closeted' sexual practices incurred in 'cottaging'. For our concern here with subculture and sexuality, Murray Healy's (1996) book *Gay Skins* is especially pertinent.

Although the notion of *Gay Skins* may appear to be a recent metropolitan phenomenon - a postmodernist appropriation of 'hard' masculinity - Healy's analysis suggests something far more troubling altogether for conventional white heterosexuality. He provides a series of life-history interviews to reveal that *Gay Skins*, far from being a recent urban trend, were involved in the first and second waves of Skinheadism. Indeed, the homosocial aspect of masculine subcultures were at times difficult to separate from the latent, homoeroticism of all-male collectivities. Moreover, Healy makes further comparisons between subculture and Queer sexualities.

In fact, there's something queer about all teen cults - just like dirty homosexuals, they're dangerous, delinquent and demonised by the press ... The paradigm fits gay men as snugly as, say, skinheads. Both act as conspicuous reminders of what men should not be. Both are transgressive in their style (1996:27).

Healy's research found that youth subculture offered a special means of escape for male, working-class gays. Where middle-class gay youth could leave home, become self-sufficient and then 'come out', working-class youth did not have the social mobility and financial independence to set up home alone. The tendency for researchers to equate 'hard' masculinity with an assumed heterosexuality has meant that social investigation of the sexual diversity of subcultural practice remains scarce. In this sense, the gay Skinhead 'short circuits accepted beliefs about real masculinity' (p.5), since 'the queer skin's value is that he opens the closed signifier of masculine authority' (p.200). Moreover, Healy's respondents give way to the end of 'innocent' notions of a gay subject, as many of these young men were implicated in the full

repertoire of racist practices associated notably with the second-wave of Skinhead youth in the late seventies and early eighties. Just as Murray Healy explores the contradictory relationship Skinheads had with homosexuality in the following chapter I draw attention to the Kempton Dene Skins' ambivalence to issues of interracial sexuality. What each of these studies share, then, is an engagement with white, heterosexual masculinities to reveal troublesome inconsistencies at the levels of subcultural style and activity.

### *Insider/Outsider accounts*

One of the most contentious issues that arise from the use of subcultural methodology is the role of representation. Recently, authors such as Christine Griffin (1993) and Bill Osgerby (1998) have provided 'studies-of-the-study' of youth culture by considering the various discursive approaches used to represent young people. A pivotal point of tension in post-war subcultural studies has been the issue of who speaks for whom and why, as well as the intending split between so-called 'insider' and 'outsider' accounts. Where the former consists of testimonies recorded by subcultural respondents themselves, the latter is comprised of accounts made by those who do not belong to the research group in question. The majority of sociological reports have been critiqued for making 'no significant attempt to incorporate into the research process accounts produced by members of subcultures themselves' (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995:3).

In many ways, my research straddles the insider/outsider divide; it privileges first-hand accounts but cannot claim 'insider' status as I was never a 'Brummie' Skinhead, nor a 'Geordie' youth. However, the authenticity of 'insider' accounts has itself come under scrutiny. For example, English Skinheads far and wide believed Richard Allen's violent pulp-fiction novels of the 1970s to be the work of a genuine Skin. In fact Allen, whose real name was Charles Moffat, turned out to be something of a disappointment - a middle-aged bloke with a penchant for drink, writing his stories in a matter of days to secure the publishing fee! So why this investment in Allen/Moffat

being a true Skin? Indeed, this anecdote raises questions about the adequacy of conceptualising subculture through a rigid insider/outsider binary.

Some editions such as George Marshall's *Spirit of '69* claim to offer 'inside' accounts of subculture, written 'not to impress some twat of a Sociology professor' but 'to give skinhead [sic.] themselves a written history of the cult' (1994:5). In his later book *Skinhead Nation*, Marshall (1996:4) goes on to explain how 'The idea behind *Spirit of '69* was to offer a view of the cult from within ...'. In contrast he is critical of Nick Knight's (1982) photo-documentary, *Skins*, which contains articles by the semiologist Dick Hebdige. The work is described as 'very much an outsider's view of the cult, something that is underlined by the patronising mix of sociology theory and tabloid-based drivel' (1996:4). In contrast, Gavin Watson's (1994:5) pictorial representation of his Skinhead friends claims direct 'insider' status by arguing that, 'If a picture paints a thousand words, this is their story to rival the countless pages of drivel that so-called experts have written about them'. Certainly, then, there is a struggle for authenticity within 'insider' accounts of subculture and a passion that is less likely to be found in reflections by those writing at a cool (often semiotic) distance. The experiential knowledge of subcultural participation may also allow for deeper levels of understanding to be achieved. Moreover, it has become ethically more acceptable for those within a youth cult to represent themselves, rather than have this done by those alien to the group who are likely to be working to their own agendas. But this does not make 'insider' accounts sacrosanct, as we shall go on to see.

An 'inside' account of Skinheadism is pursued in *The Paint House* (1972) where the Collinwood Skins are the acclaimed authors of the text, allowing Daniel and McGuire to take a background role as editors. The 'editors' insist that this vivid portrait of Skinhead culture is not their story but an 'insider' account, 'It is said by them and not interpreted by an "outsider"' (p.9), they remark. Here, the book's subtitle, 'words from an East End gang' is symbolic of the priority given to the authenticity of the 'insider' account, as is Daniel and McGuire's insistence to relinquish the authorial voice by nominating themselves as editors rather than authors. Moreover, the 'editors'

go on to question whether it is ethical for 'outsiders' to conduct research on youth subcultures, 'trying to make a bob or two out of somebody else's life', when we are told they should be asking, 'What about the skinhead's truth about skinheadism?' (p.8). In keeping with this approach, the names Daniel and McGuire are modestly absent from the cover of *The Paint House*.

But, 'insider' accounts, however well meaning they may be, still raise 'messy' issues of representation concerning how data is collected, organised, selected, shaped and, above all, contextually contingent to a particular situation and moment in time. Thus, Jamie, an ex-Collinwood member, considers his immediate feelings on reading *The Paint House*: "The only thing I don't like is all the thoughts or beliefs of the gang are what we used to feel. If I were asked now about football fights and club fights, I would feel embarrassed, to a stranger anyway" (p.112). Such statements are a sober reminder to those conducting ethnographic research with young people on the temporal nature of the findings. I hope that the youthful accounts in this thesis will not be read as final testimonies but rather as contextually specific, emergent stories in young people's coming-of-age which are no doubt themselves open to multiple readings. Having been involved in subculture myself when growing up (body-popping, break-dancing and then most memorably Acid House) I was sensitive to the unique experience of the embodied 'doing' of subculture above the collective commitment to 'style'. Here, subculture was a lived encounter that could not be adequately articulated beyond the participatory level of experience. Nevertheless, subcultural identities are only one strand of the complex tapestry of an individual's life span. So of what value is my 'outsider' account of subculture in the West Midlands and Tyneside conurbation of England?

In defence, those working in the fields of anthropology and sociology have long-recognised the merit of 'outsider' perspectives where the 'unfamiliar' is turned into a virtue. Here, it has been argued that 'outsiders' may be more attentive to a subtlety of difference in dynamic relations which 'insiders' may treat as part of an everyday norm. In this sense, the immediate privileging of 'insider' accounts above that of

those made by 'outsiders' can become increasingly problematic. While issues of power and representation are especially troublesome in 'outsider' accounts, I would suggest that we should be suspicious of *any* subcultural claims to 'authenticity', hence my personal emphasis upon the constitution of youth cultures not as substantive bodies but as discursive clusters. Indeed, the inherent moralism of some 'insider' accounts may find their authors laying claim to the production of official doctrines in the subject area. Thus, for all its careful insight George Marshall's (1994) *Spirit of '69: A Skinhead Bible*, has a subtitle which appears to pay reverence to the 'insider' account as sacred text, the holy gospel according to Skin! In contrast Murray Healy's (1996) cultural analysis of *Gay Skins* criticises Marshall's work for occluding the historical legacy of homosexuality within the cult, past and present. Thus, 'insider' accounts are also involved in a rarely acknowledged politic of representation, making them unreliable testimonies of 'truth'. Instead, a closer reading of the story of subculture would uncover dynamically contested versions and competing narratives.

A not unrelated issue regarding the insider/outsider argument concerns the issue of where exactly we draw the line between these mutually exclusive categories. In ethnographic research this is particularly difficult for as Cindi Katz (1994:67) remarks, 'Where are the boundaries between "the research" and everyday life; between "the fieldwork" and doing fieldwork; between the field and not; between "the scholar" and subject?' Furthermore, in my own research I found that the insider/outsider boundary itself fell apart when the contours of belonging shifted and turned as new points of commonality and difference arose. Here, the multiple positions that the researcher/researched come to occupy can allude to hybrid states of 'betweenness' (see Chapter 3). There, I found Heidi Nast's explanation of the inter-subjective concept of 'betweenness' a sophisticated means of problematising the insider/outsider dichotomy:

because we are positioned simultaneously in a number of fields we are always, at some level, somewhere, in a state of betweenness, negotiating various degrees and kinds of difference - be they based on gender, age, class, ethnicity, 'race', sexuality and so on. Betweenness



thus implies that we are never ‘outsiders’ or ‘insiders’ in any absolute sense (1994:57).

In this reading there can be no authentic subcultural account based on sameness. Instead, difference is a structuring relation throughout research, however intimate we may become with our respondents. In view of this interpretation it may be less helpful to speculate on assumed aspects of sameness and difference and instead more vital to consider how these tensions are negotiated during fieldwork.

### **Towards an Embodied Account of Subculture: The Historical, the Textual and the Ethnographic**

Studies of subculture usually draw on one or more of the following theoretical approaches: the historical, the textual and the ethnographic. As each of these repertoires have something to offer to the study of youth and working-class culture I have incorporated each of them, to a varying degree, within this study and shall discuss the value of their insights. Young and Willmott (1980[1957]), Rex & Moore (1979[1967])) and Phil Cohen (1972) for example, have each used local, *historical* information to interpret the changing predicament of working-class communities. The work of Stephen Humphries (1981) provides a fine example of how oral history methods may be utilised; the author supplies a vivid account of working-class childhood and youth experiences between 1889-1938. Carolyn Steedman (1984) (whose work was discussed in Chapter 1) and Valerie Walkerdine (1990) have also combined mini-personal histories and autobiographies to provide reflexive interpretations of growing-up as working-class girls at a particular historical juncture. Jeff Weeks (1997[1981]:272) has also applied historical methods to an analysis of nineteenth and early twentieth century sexual practices to write about what he terms, ‘the homosexual subculture’. In keeping with these writers, I found historiography an invaluable source for understanding the formation of whiteness and subculture in my dual research districts of Tyneside and the West Midlands. Indeed, the cultural specificity of white English ethnicity has encouraged me to devote complete sections

to the social history of regions (Chapter 1, 5, 6). As we shall go on to find, the Northern subcultures I encountered such as the Real Geordies and Charver Kids could only be understood through the historical legacy of a 'rough' and 'respectable' working class. Moreover, the ethnography of a Skinhead 'gang' in Chapter 5 argues that these particular male, working-class identities are placed in a contextual relation to their 'displaced' suburban residence and the fabric of the local Midlands economy.

One of the most popular methods for subcultural writing has been through recourse to *textual* analysis. This has taken various forms including the Skinhead fiction of authors like Richard Allen, along with a clutch of writing on football 'hooligans', heavy metallers<sup>59</sup> and ravers. Amongst the most popular recent works have been Irving Welsh's chemical generation stories - *Trainspotting* (1993), *The Acid House* (1994), *Ecstasy* (1996) - fictional narratives designed to 'speak' to, or for, a post-Rave youth culture. Some of the late populist literature has been semi-autobiographical, such as Nick Hornby's (1992) football-fandom diary *Fever Pitch*. Other 'footy fiction' like John King's (1997[1996]) *The Football Factory* (1997) have focused on the bleak brutality of football hooliganism and have been proclaimed as 'a chronicle of a lost tribe - the white, Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual ...'<sup>60</sup>. Elsewhere, some have found photography a more suitable medium of expression. Nick Knight's (1982) black and white images of Skinheads includes descriptions and written accounts of the subculture; while Gavin Watson's (1994) portrait of Wycombe Skins prefers to let the images 'speak for themselves'. Each of these visual descriptions of Skinhead style, can be considered textual approaches to subculture.

However, the most thorough textual appreciation of subculture is found in the work of Dick Hebdige, especially in his monograph *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1987[1979]). The study emphasises the potency of black-white cultural dialogues, and how they come to underpin the 'whitest' of subcultures including the Skinheads, Punks, Glam-Rockers, Mods and Teds. Hebdige's textual reconstruction draws influence from Marxist, structuralist and semiotic insights. It is a compliment to his

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<sup>59</sup> For example, Hunter S. Thompson's subcultural novel, *Heavy Metal* (1967[1966]).

fluent and accessible writing that *Subculture* has found its way onto the bookshelves of academics and musicians alike. This is especially noteworthy since much subcultural analysis has been criticised for tendencies towards ‘overtheorisation’ (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995:20). Despite this achievement, *Subculture* as with much of Hebdige’s work is in keeping with most other cultural studies of youth in its failure to engage with the lived experience of young people. Thus, Les Back (1996:12) points to the way Hebdige ‘tends to read off meanings from style formations without paying any attention to the interactional components of racial dialogue at the level of everyday experience’. In essence, Hebdige provides an account of post-war British subculture that is stripped from the lived social context of experience. The absence of structural context is all the more surprising given that Hebdige himself acknowledges that ‘the experiences encoded in subcultures is shaped in a variety of locales (work, home, school etc.). He reflects how, ‘Each of these locales impose its own unique structure, its own rules and meanings, its own hierarchy of values’ (1987:84). Not least for these reasons I have deployed ethnographic methods to contextualise young people’s interactive experiences.

Textual studies, then, fail to explain the relevance of context and pay little attention to the performative aspect of subculture when documenting participants' social lives. Moore (1994) has been especially critical of textual tendencies:

These studies comprise a sociology of appearances, for they fail to make the crucial distinction between what people say they do (representation) and what they actually do (presentation). The findings and arguments of these studies contain little information about or discussion of the performative aspects of the respective study populations (1994:15).

In order to avoid the production of a ‘sociology of appearances’ I have used ethnographic methods as a means of depicting the rich textures of young people’s social lives. This is in contrast to textual analyses that treat discussants as dry

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<sup>60</sup> Cited on the backcover and attributed to Hugh MacDonald in the *Glasgow Herald*.

artefacts from which a number of signs can be 'read off' and 'decoded' by a theoretically adept, sociological 'expert'. These methods have allowed me to 'flesh out' interviews with participant observation, field-note accounts, visual evidence, historical data and biographical material. As such, I have attempted to produce an 'embodied' account of subculture that recognises performance, action and experience, and situates this firmly within the context of young people's immediate local circumstances.

A recent textual approach entitled *The Language of Subcultures* (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995) uses interview to explore 'the extent to which language use is constitutive of personal and social identity ...' (p.1). This critical reading of language emphasises the significance of textual construction to identity formation by asking 'how it was that specific subcultural identities became salient in specific moments in accounts' (p.2). My aim, then, is not to dismiss textual accounts out of hand as other ethnographers have done, but to draw attention to the value of multidimensional portraits of youth that arise from first-hand accounts, populist fiction, sociological studies, semiotic analysis and linguistic theory. Moreover, I found elements of textual analysis were particularly useful when it came to deconstructing the visual elements of subcultural style. It is not, then, a case of empirical work versus non-empirical work but rather an intertwining of theories and practices.

While textual and historically informed accounts of subculture have flourished in the UK, the *ethnographic* methods which were favoured by the 'Chicago School'<sup>61</sup> of Sociology were to go somewhat by the wayside. The Chicago School was best known for the production of a particular urban micro-sociology that focused on people's perceptions and daily interactions. A number of 'classic' sociological reports were published from the Chicago School, including William Foote Whyte's (1981, [1943]) eternal *Street Corner Society*. According to Moore (1994:15), 'If we construct a distinction between youth studies which base their findings and argument on media reports, interviews, questionnaires, and such like, and studies firmly anchored in

ethnographic research, the majority fall into the former category'. The reasons for this are manifold, and not least centre on academics' own inhibitions about confronting young people and responding to their social world. Clearly, long-term ethnographic research is reliant upon time, group accessibility, trust, patience and an unrelenting enthusiasm on behalf of the researcher.

An example of such persistence is found in Paul Willis' (1977) ground-breaking British analysis, *Learning to Labour*. It is only by observing, speaking to and interacting with a 'counter-culture' of working-class boys known as the 'Lads' that Willis is able to deliver a fascinating account of their daily existence. This text for all its well-documented inadequacies has certainly influenced my own thinking and writing. However, for our purpose there is little investigation of the overt racism expressed by the 'Lads'; this is not helped by the absence of black and Asian voices from what would appear to be a multi-ethnic institution. How, we may ask, is racism and 'laddish' behaviour used to consolidate white working-class ethnicity within the social group and schooling context? Indeed, the significance of race as a structural influence in school cultures can be noted when Willis remarks, 'Racial identity for "the lads" supplants individual identity so that stories to friends concern not "this kid" but "this wog"' (1977:48). Indeed, this first-hand use of primary data also has advantages over certain historical and textual approaches which may at times be over-reliant upon secondary sources and fail to connect with the *experiential* matter of what we may call the doing of subculture. Further examples of British ethnographic accounts of young people's social experiences include Howard Parker's (1974) study of inner-city Liverpool males, *View from the Boys*; Robins' & Cohen's (1978) work on male, working-class communities; Paul Corrigan's (1979) depiction of Sunderland street-youth; Chris Griffin's (1985) educational study *Typical Girls*; Mairtin Mac an Ghaill's (1988) profile of black youth and schooling; Robert Hollands' (1990) labour analysis of the transition from school to work.

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<sup>61</sup> The term is used to relate to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology formed in 1892 in Chicago, USA.

However, until relatively recently there have been few extensive, qualitative accounts of race and racism in young people's lives. In Troyna and Hatcher's finely tuned account of racist processes, *Racism in Children's Lives*, the authors describe the increasing turn to ethnographic methods:

In these studies researchers have eschewed quantitative methods in favour of more penetrative, ethnographic approaches to the analysis of friendship patterns within and across ethnic (and gender) lines. This has provided a more sensitive understanding of how issues of ethnicity and 'race' figure as parts of the totality of the social and the institutional worlds of these youths (1992:18).

Alongside the work of Troyna and Hatcher, other influential studies of race and racism include Roger Hewitt's (1986) seminal study of interracial dialogues, *Black Talk White Talk*; Simon Jones' (1988) celebration of inner-city ethnic co-habitation, *Black Culture, White Youth*; and Les Back's (1996) recent multicultural research in the urban metropolis. Together, these four ethnographic studies constitute a literature on race indicating that a detailed account of the meaning of whiteness in young people's lives is now long overdue.

### *Embodied ethnographies*

While researching youth formations in the West Midlands and Tyneside I became increasingly aware of the lack of attention paid to the body in subcultural theory. Although I video-taped many of the school and youth club interviews, for reasons of confidentiality I have refrained from showing this material<sup>62</sup>. However, the visual technique drew my attention to the *embodiment* of subculture amongst youth. For example, the corporeal ritual of head-shaving amongst skinheads was a means by which the Kempton Dene Skins could mobilise a 'hard', white masculinity in the neighbourhood (Chapter 5). In contrast the loose body postures of the B-Boyz

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<sup>62</sup> Video has further allowed me to add visual descriptions to the interviews. From a personal stance, it has immortalised respondents in a memorable way, beyond the disembodied voices left on audio-tape recordings.

(Chapter 9), their gait and athleticism at basketball, were significant at the level of subcultural action and performance. In essence, this marks a shift from the CCCS portrayal of subculture where the emphasis is firmly on style, ritualistic and symbolic modes of 'resistance', towards an interpretation of young people's subcultures as 'what they actually *do*' (Gelder, 1997:145). Embodied examples of what subcultures 'do' may include the social activities of drug use, fighting on the terraces, sexual practices, body-piercing, dancing, drinking or tattooing.

In the course of researching race and ethnicity I found the imagined bodily difference of racial 'Others' was composed as a type of silent melody through which certain young people could orchestrate their whiteness. Thus, the Kempton Dene Skins would use corporeal signifiers to reiterate their 'hardness' and yet claim that black people were like apes, in an implicit production of their own white bodies as normal. Meanwhile, other subcultures such as the white 'wannabe' youth appeared entranced by a super-black athleticism.

Chris: The black basketball players can jump higher than the white basketballers I dunno why, maybe they've got more explosive legs or something. Sprinting, jumping both things - explosive legs!

In this sense it was imperative to write about bodies when the corporeal was so evidently racialised. For instance Helena, a student whose life history is discussed in detail in Chapter 10, used her body as a canvass for mutation and ethnic experimentation. She sported a tattoo and had her navel pierced. She explained to me how embodied acts of dressing-up or tattooing were related to identification with minority ethnic groups.

Helena: I've got a Chinese tattoo on us. I think its cool, Chinese signs and everything. I used to wear Chinese clothes that were silky [...] I would love to be black and have black skin.

Accounts of embodiment in subculture are scarce, though participant descriptions seem to abound with the emotional sensation of involvement. Colourful illustrations can be found in Hunter S. Thompson's drug-inspired, 'gonzo' journalism; Jack Kerouac's wandering tales of a beatnik generation epitomised in *On the Road* (1957) and the dizzy filmic portrayal of Hippy 'outsiders' in *Easy Rider*. Literary depictions such as those in L.F. Blake's (1980) pulp fiction novel *Heavy Metal* provide graphic insight into the significance of bodily sensation amongst bikers.

As he bounced across the ground he fought to control the weight that suddenly seemed alive under him. A slight smile flickered round his mouth as the wind rushed past, the earth spun up in clods from under his wheels and branches whipped across his face as he raced under trees. A log had fallen across the path and with precision he lifted the bike into an effortless jump and cleared it with feet to spare. For a long and glorious second he hung in the air free and away ... (p.1).

In embodied accounts of subculture, respondents may well refer to particular 'structures of feeling' that exist within the social milieu. This was the case in Willis' (1976) analysis of the cultural meaning of drug use, in which he interviewed a selection of Hippy 'acid heads'. Their experience of drug subculture indicated that bodily perceptions were heightened through participation: 'You can see other senses, I haven't seen a smell, but I have seen a sound, and have heard a colour' [Les] (p.110). This particular interviewee went on to describe how drugs altered embodied sexual responses.

'I did lay a "chick" on acid once, and it was the most incredible experience I think I have ever had, because the whole orgasm becomes total, er'm, ... not only in the neurological centre of the brain that gives you a sensation of pleasure, not only in the tip of the penis, but over the whole of the body, man, in the tips of my fingers, I had orgasm after orgasm. Now that was a state of as near bliss that I think I shall ever get to ...' (quoted in Willis, 1976b:110).



An intriguing example of an embodied subcultural approach to ethnography can be found in the research of David Moore (1994), a study of a Skinhead group in Perth, Australia. The book is entitled *The Lads in Action* and as the name suggests, there is an emphasis on the performative aspects of subculture. Basil Samson's (1993:x) foreword to the research alerts the reader to the knowledge that, 'There is a difference between reading culture as observed text and deriving culture from the texts of others'. However, while we may appreciate the embodied moments of subcultural activity as they occur, recording the immediacy of events is a difficult task. To get around this problem, Moore kept field-notes after daily events 'but never carried a pen and notebook relying on memory for recording events and conversations' (p.4). This is always a precarious activity (especially in Moore's case where many of the social activities were drink-related!) though it may be necessary where other means of data collection is curtailed.

The practicality of recording incidents and conversations while 'on the move' is notoriously problematic. Working as a youth worker in one research setting, a number of incidents arose which could only be documented at a later point through memory-work and the production of field-notes. The keeping of a fieldwork diary containing summaries, notes of places and times, detailed observations and potential themes for analysis were lodged. Nevertheless, I chose not to rely on these methods and endeavoured to supplement observations with taped-interviews wherever possible, prioritising recorded or written narratives. Ultimately, the flexibility of an ethnographic methodology allowed for the use of multiple research techniques with which to investigate young people's social relationships. This could not have occurred though any other methodological framework. Because I was concerned with the *process* of ethnicity in young people's lived relations, that is, with how white youth 'do' whiteness, ethnographic enquiry was the primary technique. Just as Paul Corrigan (1979:9) found in *Schooling the Smash Street Kids*, my research was to become concerned with young people themselves, 'seeing their perceptions as the starting point of research ...'. The thesis is not, then, a 'theory-led' analysis that attempts to flatten and assimilate young people's responses into a pre-existing framework. Clearly, I am informed by the literature discussed, but have identified the

responses of young people as the primary source of data for learning and critical reflection. In certain respects the interrogation of whiteness undertaken in this thesis lends itself to a form of 'critical ethnography'. Whereas conventional ethnographers generally speak *for* their subjects, critical ethnographers are concerned with raising voices and empowering subjects by speaking or writing *on behalf* of them. Reporting silenced narratives and giving them meaning in a public context is one feature of critical ethnography. As such critical ethnographers are not only concerned with the description of culture but are also implicated in strategies of social change. Jim Thomas (1993) provides a particularly lucid definition of the terms: 'conventional ethnography describes what is; critical ethnography asks what could be' (p.4). Thus, a crucial theme to explore in the thesis is the issue of 'what could be' for white youthful ethnicities in the present post-imperial climate.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter documents the history of post-war British subcultural studies. It draws upon a longstanding tradition of cultural studies approaches to youth in order to recognise the points of departure from which my research sprang forth. Special attention is given to the epistemological frameworks deployed in the study of youth (for example neo-Marxist, postmodernist, feminist and anti-oppressive paradigms) and the methodological techniques deployed in data collection and analysis (textual, historical, ethnographic). Clarifying the paradigms and methodological approaches to subculture is significant as it enables us to further understand the scope and purposes of the research undertaken here. Furthermore, we are now better placed to achieve a clearer insight about the contribution that the thesis can make by way of a thorough consideration of the ethnicities of white youth.

The chapter vindicates the use of subcultural and ethnographic methods of enquiry and also indicates some of the ethical dilemmas raised during the course of investigation. As such, the section extends some of the issues raised in Chapter 3 concerning the micro-politics of research. Here, we looked at the complex and contingent ways in which the cultural identities of the researcher/researched were

negotiated in the fieldwork encounter. Of particular concern had been the subjectivities of researcher/researched and how these identities came to be fashioned and re-fashioned throughout the research process. By further exploring issues related to the masculinism of subcultural research we have been able to transcend the positivist assumption that some research is bias or subjective and should aim instead to be 'objective' and rational. The subjectivity of research and the struggle for meaning were most evidently illustrated in discussions concerning insider/outsider accounts. The concept of insider authenticity was found to be a misleading notion embedded in a false dichotomy that implied these accounts were somehow 'true' or 'genuine' as opposed to outsider reports that ultimately offered a misrepresentation. Finally, we considered the relationship between embodiment and subculture as this was a theme that featured throughout the research (Chapter 5, 8, 9) and yet, with a few notable exceptions was seldom discussed in the literature.

The chapter further outlined some of the many turns and twists that have so far accompanied the progression of subcultural studies of youth. This story is on-going. The micro-history revealed a development in analyses from the early, widespread 'moral panic' that concerned young people's behaviour. Later research was to show how youth were designated as 'deviant' and revealed the ideological meanings underpinning such representations (Becker, 1966; Cohen, S. 1973). In particular, the 'Othering' of youth was found to have a longstanding presence in post-war British society, as seen in the treatment of latter day Teddy boys and modern day Ravers as troublesome outsiders. The Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches to subculture throughout the 1970s was instead to emphasise the relationship between economic relations and subcultural style. This form of research was popularised by the CCCS, although the emphasis lay largely with textual observations rather than social interaction. Further approaches were to move towards more socially inclusive notions of 'youth' by examining the hitherto 'invisible' lives of females, ethnic minorities and gay and lesbian young people. These anti-oppressive studies not only sought to place issues of gender, race and sexuality alongside those of social class, but rather called for a reformulation of economic theory. However, postmodernist studies of youth culture have questioned the hermetically sealed notion of subculture. Furthermore,

these recent approaches have rejected the concept of 'resistance' in favour of more complex ideas related to the multiplicity of young peoples' subjectivities. For example, some of these writers have moved away from theories of production and placed an emphasis, instead, on patterns of consumption.

The chapter also considered the various methodological approaches deployed in the doing of subcultural studies. The modes of analysis included historical, textual and ethnographic methods: these techniques have all been used here as we will now discover. Having provided a detailed portrait of youth research and explored the problems and limitations that arise when conducting an analysis of subculture, we will now consider our first empirical study, the Kempton Dene Skins. As a group of white working-class males with shared values, a collective dress code and a tendency to exhibit 'spectacular' moments of real and symbolic violence, the 'gang' contained all the ingredients to be a 'classic' subculture. However, our focus remains firmly upon the display of white ethnicity and the underlying contradictions that emerge when the Skins attempt to perform a coherent white identity. By focusing on the ascendant categories of identity (whiteness, masculinity and heterosexual) the research is a development upon anti-oppressive studies which have focused almost exclusively on the subordinated existence of young people. The chapter begins by describing the geographic context in which the research is set and later provides a detailed description of the locality and the backgrounds of the respondents. It goes on to document previous work on Skinhead youth before analysing the ethnographic responses of our contemporary subculture. The study chillingly demonstrates how young people may deploy racism in the 'making' of a hostile white ethnicity. Most strikingly it was found that while few white youth ever discuss their ethnicities the Kempton Dene Skins were obsessive about their allegiance to a fervent white, English masculinity. Not least for these reasons the subculture provide a compelling, if not exaggerated profile of whiteness.

***PART II***

**‘DOING WHITENESS’**

**YOUTH SUBCULTURES AND REGIONAL IDENTITIES**

**‘Pale Warriors’**  
**Skinhead Culture and the Embodiment**  
**of White English Nationalism in the West Midlands**

**Chapter 5**

## Introduction

This first empirical chapter in Part II is drawn from ethnographic work conducted on the Kempton Dene estate at the periphery of the West Midlands conurbation, England. It focuses upon the exhibition of white, English nationalism within an all-male Skinhead friendship group. In particular the research identifies connections between race, place and whiteness. Previously in this study an investigation of urban historiography was undertaken to demonstrate how the English city, along with many of its inhabitants, was classified as racially distinct (Chapter 1). Yet as we shall go on to find, the racialisation of cities as dark, foreign quarters went hand in hand with representations of the countryside and its surrounding rural villages as white, English retreats. This chapter begins by briefly outlining the contemporary social geography of the English countryside to examine how established notions of whiteness can be further encapsulated in the myth of suburban living. And yet, in the present socio-economic situation the concept of the suburban estate has also come to hold a contradictory place in the English imagination as we shall discover in subsequent representations of Kempton Dene.

Having provided a geographic context for the study, the research will go on to explore the meaning of whiteness amongst a suburban, English Skinhead subculture. In particular we will consider the *embodiment* of a specific white working-class ethnicity through subcultural style and action. The theme of embodiment was developed in Chapter 1. Here, historical evidence drew attention to bourgeois representations of the working-class body. Middle-class writers were found to attribute particular characteristics to the bodies of the urban poor and so distinguish them as a race apart. In contrast, my account of white working-class youth is based on observing, speaking to and interacting with the subculture concerned. The ethnography reveals how the Skins represent their own corporeal white masculinities through embodied relations with imaginary black Others. In this chapter, then, the focus is upon the corporeal depiction of whiteness through Skinhead style and the various tropes used by the subculture to provide bodily portrayals of minority groups, notably Asians and African-Caribbean peoples. Significantly, the corporeal metaphors that were ascribed

to black Others by the Skins functioned to conceal the simultaneous production of their own white, English ethnicities.

Of value here is the semiotic work of Dick Hebdige (1982,1987) who has compared the performativity of Skinhead style with the motions of dance. Here, Skins move to a *dissonant* rhythm, out of synch with much of society:

Just watch the way a skinhead moves. The posture is organised ... The head twists out as if the skin is wearing an old fashioned collar that's too tight for comfort. The cigarette, tip turned in towards the palm, is brought down from the mouth in an exaggerated arc and held behind the back. It's a gesture reminiscent of barrack rooms and Borstals, of furtive smoking on the parade. That's the dance of Skin ... nervous and twitchy ... They're always on their toes, ready to respond to the slightest provocation, ready to defend the little they possess (a football end, a pub, a street, a reputation). The dance of Skin is, then, ... the mime of awkward masculinity - the geometry of menace ... Two obsessions dominate the style: being *authentic* and being *British* (Hebdige 1982:27-28).

Setting aside the superficial nature of Hebdige's observations (which bear close relation to the character portraits of the working-class body made by nineteenth century bourgeois writers) some points of interest certainly arise. Accordingly, the aim of this chapter is to deconstruct the white, working-class masculinities of a Skinhead subculture by explaining the 'two obsessions' with 'being authentic' and 'being British'. The 'dance of Skin' Hebdige refers to shall be developed to consider the choreography of whiteness as a style fashioned in an attempt to embody a desired working class, white masculinity. In Skinhead subculture the enactment of whiteness can be seen as a highly regulatory posture that achieves further recognition through group simulation. The activity suggests whiteness is a repetitive, highly stylised ritual of display. The metaphor of choreography touches on the performative aspects of whiteness, which enable skinhead style to be likened to a 'ghost dance of white ethnicity' (Mercer, 1994:123). The ethnographic evidence in my research indicates that emulating the dance requires practice, timing, correct use of costume and careful body regulation. The apparent ease with which young men are able to mimic a



phantasmal mode of whiteness conceals the intensive labour involved in presenting a coherent white masculinity. Even so, I will go on to identify times when the performance is revealed as an 'act', and moments where young men are seen to be 'out of step' with the regulatory specificities of simulating whiteness. The chapter will, then, also reveal the *contradictions* embedded in Skinhead style and action.

### **'Pastoral Interludes' - Rural Racism and the English Suburbs**

In the mythic imagination the 'essence' of Englishness is popularly portrayed through a return to an unchanging rural idyll. Indeed, English literature, poetry and painting have all been profoundly concerned with the pastoral tradition. How this image perseveres in a country that embarked on the Industrial Revolution nearly 160 years earlier is strange enough. That more of the nation's inhabitants reside in urban areas than compared to anywhere else in Europe makes this pastoral depiction of Englishness appear all the more striking. As Jonathan Rutherford (1997:55) has perceptively remarked in his book *Forever England*, the countryside has come to resemble the cradle of white English civilisation, 'a bastion against degeneracy'. In contrast to the emergence of British cities, and the attendant social problems that were encountered, the myth encouraged a retrospective gaze back to the country as a prelapsarian Garden of Eden. Moreover, the repertoire of social concerns associated with cities - including poverty, urban decay, disease, slum housing, prostitution, pollution and over-population - were assembled to form a type of racialised anatomy. As Scutt and Bonnett (1996:12) comment, 'A major part of the "White flight" from the urban was an escape from what was believed to be the racial degradation of the English "race" within the cities ... By contrast, the countryside became the place to breed a healthy, moral race and a repository of a way of life which must be protected at all costs'.

So what are the social implications of a continued adherence to this romanticised, antiquated image of Englishness? This has been a key concern for the Black Environmental Network (BEN) which was set up in 1988 with a view to making the

countryside more accessible to ethnic minorities (Kinsman, 1997). Organisers Julien Ageyman and Rachel Spooner explain:

... for white people the 'inner city' has become a coded term for the imagined deviance of people of colour, a place of fear and a place to avoid. These ethnic identities and fears may also be mapped onto the contemporary British countryside ... In the white imagination people of colour are confined to towns and cities, representing an urban, 'alien' environment, and the white landscape of rurality is aligned with 'nativeness' and the absence of evil and danger (1997:199).

Here the inner city is racially coded as dark and dangerous while the countryside is equated with whiteness and safety. As such, the presence of black people in the English countryside is rendered problematic, they are seen as 'out of place' and not belonging. The artist Ingrid Pollard captured this sense of estrangement from the rural landscape in images exhibited in the *Pastoral Interludes* photographic series in 1984 (see Pollard, 1989; 1993). Pollard, a professional black photographer, was surprised to find her holiday snaps of walking in the Lake District mistaken as a conscious attempt to subvert a quintessential white, English landscape. By later re-working these themes explicitly, combining photographic images with provocative captions like 'I wandered lonely as a black face in a sea of white' Pollard's collection brings out into the open the implicit racialised meanings associated with pastoral versions of the nation. She writes, '... it is as if the black experience is only lived within an urban environment ... A visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease, dread ...' (depicted in Kinsman, 1995). Pollard's exhibition has subsequently been described as 'reshaping the imaginative geography of the English landscape in a powerful way' (Kinsman, 1995:308). It is this 'imaginative geography' of urban and rural environments that is of pertinence here to our understandings of white ethnicity<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> For a further discussion of Ingrid Pollard's work see also Lola Young's article in the first issue of *Soundings*.

Beyond the aesthetic issues raised by Pollard's photography recent studies have highlighted how a banal and everyday reality of harassment and racism is present in rural areas (Derbyshire, 1994; Jay, 1992; Nizhar, 1995). A study of ethnic relations in Devon found that 40% of young whites were hostile to the idea of having black and especially Asian neighbours<sup>64</sup>. The overall message from white youth is made abundantly evident in the title of Eric Jay's (1992) study of racism in Southwest England, *Keep them in Birmingham*. The underlying discourse is that the British urban environment has become a type of 'concrete jungle', given over to the marauding 'rule' of ethnic minorities. By contrast, white ethnicity must be replenished within the haven of the English countryside. Nostalgic depictions of rural England were recently evoked by the former Tory Prime Minister John Major when he sentimentally eulogised 'long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers, old maids bicycling to holy communion through the morning mist'<sup>65</sup>. By way of a shared discourse, ultra-Right parties have frequently addressed nationhood through nature, in the belief that it is through contact with the soil that British people could rejuvenate their mystical racial qualities. Moreover, recent evidence suggests that Right-wing activities have been directed at rural areas in an attempt to develop an extreme cell of nationalist opinion more readily resisted in the cities<sup>66</sup>. Ultimately, the empirical data indicates that while the image of the suburban rose remains a quaint motif of Englishness, the symbol conceals thorns of white hostility that are rooted in a volatile 'rural racism'.

The suburbs are in many ways the interstitial space between town and country, the escape-hatch required to fulfil the promise of 'white flight'. Here, 'the invincible green suburbs' that John Major spoke of become a kind of borderland, operating at the interface between urbanisation and rurality, a zone where associations of the countryside are articulated through the privately owned residential homes and

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<sup>64</sup> For further discussion of racism and anti-racism in Devon see also Bonnett (1993).

<sup>65</sup> In the wake of the defeat of the Conservative government in 1997, the new opposition leader William Hague has tried to distance himself from a rose-tinted view of the nation in favour of an urban Britain that is 'multi-ethnic, brassy, self-confident and international'. While these platitudes are little more than political rhetoric, they point to the way in which nationhood is constructed through notions of a mythic space.

<sup>66</sup> In 1996 the rural race equality project (RREP) was set up with funding from the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Rural Development Commission (now the Countryside Agency).

gardens. And yet as Nick Hornby (1994[1992]) proclaims in *Fever Pitch*, English suburbia is an imaginary space that appears somehow disconnected and detached from the beating heart of the city. He recalls, 'Ever since I have been old enough to understand what it means to be suburban I have wanted to come from somewhere else ... And what is suburban post-war middle-class English culture anyway?' (pp.48-49). A timely question, indeed. Where at one time the English suburbs were regarded as the retreat of the 'well to do', post-war social and economic changes have given way to divergent forms of community. These internal differences centre round notions of the 'estate' as a key register of working-class identity. Beatrix Campbell (1993a:320) has described these peripheral estates as 'warehouses of the working class' and goes on to discuss the changing symbolic meaning of these locations:

The word that embraced everything feared and loathed by the new orthodoxy about class and crime was *estate*: what was once the emblem of respectability ... now described only the edge of a class and the end of the city. 'Estate' evoked rookery, slum, ghetto - without the exotic energy of the city (p.319).

Thus, where the outlying districts of English cities had been seen as places for physical and spiritual recuperation - promoting clean air, healthy living and a moral fortitude that was felt to be absent from the urban interior - the 'estate' was to alter the symbolic meaning of these environments. As Campbell explains above, the term 'estate' conjures up different associations that run contrary to the smooth link between the suburbs and countryside. Despite the move to privatisation in the eighties, the 'estate' remains a key reference point for working-class identity formation, saturated with class-based meanings for young people.

Moreover, ripples in the pond-life of suburbia had earlier occurred amongst the nation's youth with the public emergence of punk rock in late-1976. As Dick Hebdige has shown, the anger of the Punks was 'predicated upon a denial of place. It issued out of nameless housing estates, anonymous dole queues, slums-in-the-abstract. It was blank, expressionless, rootless' (1995:65). For Hebdige this

'rootless' hostility arises from the changing situation of working-class youth and can be contrasted with the perceived 'roots' of reggae espoused by black British communities of the period. That many Punks resided in 'nameless estates' amidst the flora and fauna of suburbia could not disguise the frustration and boredom that impinged upon suburban youth, rich and poor alike<sup>67</sup>. Neither could it detract from the immediate class structure that had, by and large, left these young people geographically estranged and socially bereft of the pleasures of the city. For some, the possibilities of suburban embourgeoisment were unavailable; for others, they would have to wait until they could at least earn their own living. As such, some critics have likened Punk to an 'aesthetics of boredom' and referred to its multiple class appeal in provincial quarters (Frith, 1983:266). Others have also emphasised how many Punks were from London's commuter-belt, including 'A retinue of the Sex Pistol's earliest followers ... known as the "Bromley contingent", their members hailing from this south London suburb and its surrounding area' (Osgerby, 1998:197). Although Punk was never purely working class, just as it was never simply about anarchic politics, the subculture nevertheless offered a release for the suburban disquiet and anger of Britain's dislocated youth.

It is within this peculiar suburban cultural milieu that notions of 'territory', identity and social change are negotiated and struggled over by the young. In some outer-city locales this has given rise to an alternative spatial distribution of social deprivation. Writing about over-spill council estates on the edges of large British cities, Anne Power paints a somewhat depressing picture and one that runs contrary to perceptions of suburbia:

Crime in these areas is four times higher than the national average ...  
Truancy rates are four times higher. These estates have come to house  
heavy concentrations of young, poorly educated, unemployed men  
who have no stake or recognised role in their communities. Many of  
them see no harm in stealing cars, attacking police, intimidating older  
residents or forming gangs to claim control of the streets (1997:15).

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<sup>67</sup> The outskirts of Birmingham are one of the recognised birth-places of heavy metal. See Eddy Lawrence, This is the Sound of the Suburbs, *Big Issue* (February 22-28, 1999, no.232, pp. 14-15)

So what has happened to the English suburbs, a preserve that has hitherto been so emphatically underscored with notions of gentility and aspiration? Rather than alleviating social inequalities, the movement of working-class families from the city to the suburbs appears to have created more visible sub-divisions and an increasing sense of instability. Furthermore, investments in the social geography of the neighbourhood, a recognised feature of working-class life in the inner cities (see Young & Willmott, 1980[1957], Phizacklea & Miles, 1979) have sprouted new forms of attachment and belonging in suburban estates. The ways in which young men embrace racism and regional pride in these predominantly white contexts is testimony to this. For young men in particular, local notions of identity can manifest in intense, often ethnically exclusive, ways. David Robins (1984:16) has pointed out how ‘a white skin can become a statement of identity’ amongst working-class youths: here, the corporeal enactment of whiteness may appear as a reaction to social transformation. The rapidly changing constitution of working-class communities in relation to economic upheaval and geographical dislocation may well have given rise to some deep fault lines of uncertainty as these transitions have been in process. Clarke and Jefferson (1973:6) have referred to these fractures as ‘cracks in the veneer’ of the ideal of ‘classlessness’ that have had a profound affect upon working-class peoples. They go on to discuss the repercussions of post-war redevelopment:

The removal of families to new towns and estates fragmented the extended family links so central in the traditional community, and both this geographical movement and the design of new houses and flats based on the needs of the ideal (i.e. bourgeois) nuclear family were instrumental in this destruction of the bases of the community. The further consequences for those who remained behind was ... the influx of numbers of coloured immigrants, in search of inexpensive housing, whose presence was interpreted by the indigenous population as lowering the social standing of the neighbourhood (1973:3).

It is these factors of population distribution, economic inequality and class-cultural conflict that accompanied the historical birth of the Kempton Dene estate in 1952.

*'Ostensibly white': The Kempton Dene estate in the West Midlands conurbation*

In the aftermath of World War II, Kempton Dene<sup>68</sup> was earmarked as a prestigious place to live when compared to the public housing stock as a whole. However, rather than representing an oasis of wealth on the fringes of the city of Birmingham the suburb displays a class diversity containing both public housing estates and privately owned residential accommodation. Moreover, there are deeply felt class resentments between those who have lived in the locality for much of their life (a consequence of post-war inner city rebuilding) and those who have recently purchased the dream of a suburban lifestyle. This tension has been exacerbated by Tory attempts to encourage aspiring working-class individuals to become house-owners and purchase what was previously council property. Subsequently, there is a large proportion of owner-occupied households on the estate, numbering close to 50%, a testimony to the 'boom and bust' economy of Conservatism in the 1980s<sup>69</sup>. During the research period mortgage rates increased, while repossession, crime and redundancies set in. It is within this social context that racism has become increasingly visible in the area.

The Kempton Dene estate is situated on the outskirts of south-east Birmingham and is replete with white picket fences and rose-bushed gardens. On one side of the estate, residents look out on to open fields and farmland, while the other corners of the community border the affluent town of Chalk Vale and its surrounding borough. At the time of the last census reading in 1991, the statistics record a population of 4,182 people on 'The Dene', of which 98% of citizens were classified as white. The reading found that 86 people were drawn from minority ethnic groups and from this small fraction 42% were African-Caribbean and 43% were Asian. The minority populace

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<sup>68</sup> A feature of post-war suburban housing estates is that they are frequently given quasi-rural names.

<sup>69</sup> According to journalist Jim McClennan of *The Big Issue* (February 22-28, 1999, no. 323) 'The truth is that everything changed in the Eighties, including the suburbs. Now you don't know what you'll find there' (p. 17).

included residents, shopkeepers and those who had chosen to take advantage of the good reputations of the nearby schools<sup>70</sup>.

With a mere 2% black populace, Kempton Dene appears an unusual site for racist struggle and inter-ethnic hostility, yet this is precisely what is occurring. Suburban areas such as 'the Dene' appear as stark enclaves of whiteness when placed alongside the broader, vibrant metropolis of the city of Birmingham which can boast that approximately a quarter of its million peoples are non-white residents<sup>71</sup>. Indeed, the geographical location of the estate, combined with the lack of ethnic diversity, can encourage the area to be viewed as a remote white enclave. As such, Kempton Dene has a markedly different pattern of settlement to the urban interior described by Rex & Moore (1979[1967]) and Simon Jones (1988) in their respective Birmingham studies of Sparkbrook and Balsall Heath. These inner-city zones contained shared living quarters, multi-ethnic schools and mixed leisure spaces, invoking an altogether different urban ecology from the all-but-white patterns of community seen on 'The Dene'. Simon Jones describes the qualitative difference separating the outer reaches of Birmingham from the central zones:

The social geography of these areas, with their large, sprawling housing estates, contrasted markedly with that of the inner city. The black population here was obviously far smaller and dispersed ... Predictably, these areas were characterised by much lower levels of black-white contact, and by much stronger and more prominent forms of both informal and organised racism. (1988:126)

While long-term contact between black and white communities may be the norm in Birmingham's urban areas such as Sparkbrook, Balsall Heath and Handsworth, this

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<sup>70</sup> There were two Secondary Schools in Kempton Dene containing students from the neighbourhood and the surrounding affluent borough. I conducted intensive ethnographic research in one of these schools, Ridgeway Comprehensive, but scope does not allow for a detailed exposition of the findings. Instead I have used these interviews and observations to understand the representation of the estate and the Skinhead group who resided there.

<sup>71</sup> The geographical significance of researching racism in the outer-city is paramount, with up to ten times the number of reported incidents occurring in the English suburbs compared with the inner-city.



was not found to be the case in the West Midlands outer ring<sup>72</sup>. Similarly, Ernest Ellis Cashmore (1987) found attitudes towards blacks were markedly hostile in the Birmingham outer-city district of Chelmsley Wood, a popular zone for 'white flight' in the post-war years, containing only 2.1 % of peoples from the New Commonwealth. Moreover, longstanding evidence of racist tensions can be found within the broader social geography of the region. Indeed, the pull of whiteness has been especially apparent when it comes to the struggle for resources including jobs and housing. Most famously in 1964 the Conservative candidate Peter Griffiths unexpectedly defeated Labour in the Birmingham district of Smethwick by exploiting the infamous slogan, 'If you want a Nigger for a Neighbour Vote Labour'<sup>73</sup>. This was no isolated appeal to white privilege. Previously, in 1955, white West Bromwich bus workers staged a series of one-day strikes in protest against the employment of a single Indian bus conductor (Fryer, 1984). The popular local support enjoyed by former MP Enoch Powell in parts of Birmingham and his home constituency of Wolverhampton also provide some of the most forceful examples of how a 'white backlash'<sup>74</sup> has emanated from the heartland of the English Midlands. With specific reference to the region Powell declared, 'In your town, in mine in Wolverhampton, in Smethwick, in Birmingham, people see with their own eyes what they dread, the transformation during their own lifetime or, if they are already old, during their children's, of towns, cities and areas that they know into alien territory'. These comments resonate with the industrial anxieties of the bourgeoisie, experienced in the nineteenth century, on account of the changing English urban landscape and the visibility of working-class culture (Chapter 1).

Inner-city uprisings by black and white youth against poverty and the racism of policing authorities first in 1981 and then again in 1985 are testimony to the struggles that have occurred in the West Midlands conurbation. However, the uprisings were

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<sup>72</sup>Working as a youth worker in another outlying Birmingham district, I found evidence of marked racist expression amongst certain members of the community who insisted on keeping the suburb ostensibly white.

<sup>73</sup> Griffiths defeated the Labour candidate MP, Patrick Gordon Walker by using the 'race card'. He reflected on the notorious slogan by adding, 'I should think that is a manifestation of the popular feeling. I would not condemn anyone who said that. I would say that is how people see the situation in Smethwick. I fully understand the feelings of the people who say it.' (*Times* 9/3/64).

<sup>74</sup> The theme of a 'white backlash' is addressed in detail in Chapter 7.

encoded by the popular press and Right-wing politicians as having little to do with social inequality, ultimately they were UnBritish, 'black riots'. The unspoken aspects of white working-class frustration were effectively articulated in the Clash anthem of the 1970's, 'White Riot'. The track has been described as arising from the after-effect 'of being caught in the racial no-man's land between charging police and angry black youth at the Notting Hill Carnival riots of 1976' (Coon, 1977 cited in Gilroy, 1995:125). It is within this 'racial no-man's land' of the suburb - the zone between the alleged 'black' inner city and the 'white' countryside - that a hostile posture of white ethnicity is being adopted by working-class males in celebration of Skinhead style. Solomos and Back (1995) have shown how the racialisation of residential districts within the city of Birmingham can be traced to press reports from the 1950s. These reports identify wards as 'black' even when settlers from the New Commonwealth were living alongside what remains a predominantly white ethnic majority. These quarters were also mapped through a discursive cartography that labelled particular places as areas of vice, drugs, conflict, crime and miscegenation.

I found that a similar 'colour code' was also in operation amongst a cross-section of young people who could use the symbol of an imagined 'black' inner city to promote their own identities as white and thereby assert exclusive notions of local territory. Thus, in the wake of the supposed 'black riots' that occurred within the dark, inner city districts of the West Midlands, Skinhead culture can provide a statement of white, English ethnicity that may sublimate the sense of frustration, deprivation and dislocation of living in an outer-city area. As we shall find, the young men in this study have certainly been successful in providing their estranged area with a meaningful, however uncomfortable, notion of white exclusivity. As Jackson and Penrose (1993:205) have shown, 'Place contextualises the construction of "race" and nation, generating geographically specific ideologies of racism and nationalism'. In keeping with this racialised cartography of the city the Kempton Dene Skins celebrated the reputation of their area as a bastion of working-class whiteness, a place associated with crime, racism and street violence. One student who went to school on 'The Dene', but lived in a more prestigious suburb, described the image the locality had:

Roger (15 years): It's a council estate and any council estate is classed as rough with anybody who doesn't live there. If you go through you'll see people hanging around on the shops 'cos there's nothing else to do and a lot of them will follow certain racist groups or whatever but not all of them. And they all have particular hair-cuts and wear the same clothes, listen to the same music and they've all got the same interests. And people who don't come from there get sort of frightened that there's a big gang.

*Anoop: D'you go there yourself?*

Roger: To Kempton Dene? No. I try to steer clear because it's best not to get mixed up with people who hang around and cause trouble.

As Roger asserts, the 'estate' has a place in the English imaginary for its association with working class culture and being 'rough'. He goes on to explain how a subcultural response has been evoked by young people living on 'The Dene' who present a facade of working-class coherence through having the same hair-cuts, clothes, musical tastes and racist allegiances. Moreover, this 'hard' face appears to consolidate the image of the area and its inhabitants as 'trouble', encouraging outsiders to keep a safe distance. Teachers also interpreted Kempton Dene as 'rough' and recognised it as a concentrated cell for racist activity, thereby excusing black students who were late for lessons on the basis that they had to avoid bus routes which went directly through the estate. At one stage the situation was so traumatic that black students were 'bussed' in and out of the school by means of a special school service. In the course of conducting interviews in the local school, many students who lived outside of 'The Dene' spoke of it as a 'no-go' zone, particularly at night. Thus, the social geography of outer-city racism had a profound effect on the routes available to black students and youth from outside the locality.

Recently Power (1997:14) has argued, 'In Britain, all-white peripheral council estates of a thousand or more households are often more isolated, poorer and closer to social

breakdown than racially mixed inner cities'. A member of the local police force explained the specific configurations between place, social class and racism to me:

PC: Kempton Dene is a typical 1950s over-spill council estate. It's not without its problems, just because it's got a Chalk Vale postcode it doesn't mean to say that there is not evidence of deprivation on that estate because by God there is. But because politically ... I don't think money is directed fairly because certain areas of the city have got a particular postcode they will be funded for this, that and the other. Poor old Kempton Dene, stuck all the way out there, on the side of the Vale ... it gets left out.

Another policeman who had patrolled the neighbourhood for 16 years described Kempton Dene as 'a predominantly 100% white estate' and noted how the concentration of criminal activity in the borough of Chalk Vale was predominantly focused within 'The Dene'. In 1992 there had been 396 reported crimes, yet while this had dropped by 76 to 320 the following year these figures were still significantly higher than those in other parts of the district<sup>75</sup>.

### *The Kempton Dene Skins*

In an edited collection on race and racism Peter Jackson (1987) argued that it was not simply enough for geographers to describe the spatial aspects of ethnic minority experience but that the discipline must now be attentive to the production and reproduction of racism. In his introduction Jackson also reveals how racism is bound up with the concept of English nationalism. Using these insights as a starting point we will now consider issues of space, racism and English nationalism in the West Midlands.

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<sup>75</sup> There was an overall sub-divisional increase in crime during this period of a further 279 reported activities. It must be stressed that these figures cannot be read as an accurate index of social deprivation, though they do present some further evidence of the social situation of Kempton Dene in relation to other suburban constituencies.

Statistical evidence drawn from police records and the Birmingham Racial Attacks Monitoring Unit (BRAMU), indicate that the vast majority of racist attacks are concentrated in the outer-band of the city. These findings also suggest that the perpetrators of racist violence are invariably groups of young white men in their teens and early 20s (14-25 years). Police figures further estimate that almost three quarters of the perpetrators of racist violence are white males aged 13-25 years, while the Commission for Racial Equality have recently indicated that it is men who are responsible for approximately 80% of all racially motivated offences (CRE, 1997). The direct ways in which white working-class masculinities can be seen to be bolstered and empowered through acts of racist violence at a street level continue to make these activities noticeably prevalent within young men's peer activities.

The core perpetrators of racist activity in Kempton Dene consisted of an informal masculine peer group that comprised 7-10 members who were aged 13-16 years, with the mean age of youth 15-16 years. Five members identified themselves as white (Daniel, Robbie, Darren, Paul, Mark) while Calvin and Leonard were from 'mixed-heritage' backgrounds with English mothers and African-Caribbean fathers. Significantly, the young white males were all from large families who had lived on 'The Dene' for a number of years. These families had notorious reputations within the community and were feared by many residents. It was rumoured that most of the criminal activities that occurred on the estate were attributable to one of three families from which the young men all belonged. Moreover, there was evidence that certain family members had previously voted for the British National Party and the National Front during elections. The reputations of these families were further enhanced by images of the estate as 'racist' and 'hard' by people who lived in neighbouring areas. However, this portrayal of the area was often contested by other, older members of the community as a misrepresentation: in contrast it was publicly celebrated by the subculture. At the time of the research, the young white men interviewed were either unemployed, about to leave school, or, in the case of Daniel, had even been expelled for 'paki-bashing'. None of the respondents were in permanent employment and had a fragmentary work experience at best, gained from temporary manual labour helping out their fathers when situations arose. Consequently, they spent long stretches of

time out on the streets but during evenings occupied a local youth club. It was within this particular leisure space that in-depth interviews were conducted by myself and a colleague, Les Back<sup>76</sup>. It became evident that the geographical location of 'The Dene' and its reputation for trouble were an important part of neighbourhood folklore.

Racist hostility is further compounded by a deprivation rarely associated with suburban contexts, and at odds with the visible signs of prosperity apparent in the surrounding borough. The working-class youth who lived on the estate identified themselves 'as against' both an imagined black inner city and also in opposition to the more affluent suburbs nearby. They remained intensely proud of their neighbourhood and were loathed to leave it despite the absence of local employment possibilities:

*Does it mean a lot to you to live around here?*

Robbie: Yeah, I love it. Got a name, that's what I like.

*What kind of name?*

Darren: Born on the Dene and I'll live on the Dene all my life.

Robbie: Ruff 'n' tuff. That's what we are. We stick together.

The regional identities of the group are, then, central to understanding the forms of whiteness they came to occupy within the suburban locality. That the estate had a 'name' was a source of pride and honour for the young men concerned. The comments about 'sticking together' were both a statement concerning working-class community and white male bonding. It was precisely because white working-class masculinities were felt to be 'in crisis' at these levels that they were so virulently asserted in the space of the local. The prevailing economic situation appears to have left the Skins without a secure work-based identity where investments in specific

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<sup>76</sup> The interviews were carried out as part of an Economic and Social Science Research Council Grant (ESRC 000234272) investigating the social basis of racist violence amongst young people in outer city areas. I was the fieldworker researching with Les Back in outer-city Birmingham, while Roger Hewitt carried out comparative analysis in the peripheries of South London (see Hewitt, 1996). I was further supported by Ian Barker, a Sociology student from the University of Central England who aided the research process during his work experience period.

styles of whiteness became a substitute for the masculine-affirmative process of manual labour. Arguing for the protection of 'white' jobs became an example of this 'rights for whites' discourse. Here, the young men discuss the issues of immigration and employment:

Daniel (white): It's our country, not theirs.

Leonard (mixed-heritage): Yeah, they don't belong in our country<sup>77</sup>.

Daniel (white): Fuck 'em off. They've got all the jobs, like me and Mark could be working now but fucking two pakis [*referring to local Asian shopkeepers*] have jumped in our place haven't they?

The sense of white ownership over the nation ('our country') and the labour market ('our place') is illustrative of the subculture's inability to relinquish white privilege. In this respect, my findings correlate with those developed by Robert Hollands (1990) in his study of youth training schemes, also undertaken in the West Midlands region. Writing about the plight of less upwardly-mobile working-class males, Hollands confirms how this stratum, 'have a strong interest in maintaining "white identity" in the context of the present economic crisis, because ... they are in a declining position, even if this has nothing to do with the presence and activities of black people' (p.171). I will now go on to consider how the *embodiment* of Skinhead style and the display of white ethnicity could allow the Kempton Dene males to vicariously live out the fantasy of an authentic working-class existence in the present out-of-work situation.

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<sup>77</sup> Directing venom against an Asian 'Other' was one way through which the mixed-heritage males, Calvin and Leonard, could insert themselves into a white racist group and claim Britain as 'our country'.

## **'White Lives': Performing whiteness through subcultural style and action**

The Kempton Dene Skins each sported closely cropped hair which were subtle variations on generic Skinhead styles<sup>78</sup>. Here, the shaven-headed appearance was an essential means for embodying a regional, working-class masculinity. Despite stylistic differences from older-generations of Skinhead subcultures discussed in Chapter 4, the Kempton Dene males nevertheless identified themselves as 'genuine' Skinheads:

*Did you shave your head for a Skinhead style?*

Darren: Yeah, that's what everyone has down 'The Dene': a Skinhead. Don't they?

Robbie: It's the trademark.

Darren: I used a BIC [type of razor] and ...

*What's it a trademark for?*

Robbie: Don't mess with the Dene!

Darren: Don't mess with the Skinheads!

Robbie: [*chanting*] Skiiiiin-'eads!

The key term here is 'trademark': the young men see the Skinhead cut as an immediate guarantee of working-class masculinity. The image is one of aggression, a celebratory 'trademark' that is believed to be representative of the 'hard' regional culture of the community. However, this masculine identification with being 'genuine' or 'authentic' also evokes a sense of being loyal to one's regional working-class roots. The shaven-headed appearance accentuates the 'geometry of menace' Hebdige (1982) identified earlier and is underlined by the comment, 'Don't mess with

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<sup>78</sup> See Jim Ferguson's *Fashion Notebook* (1982:36-47) for nuances within Skinhead style and the varied fashions that were worn in different contexts and moments in time.



the Skinheads!’ The interconnection between Skinhead style, whiteness and masculinity was to be given further emphasis when the young men sprayed ‘Don’t fuck with Whites!’ in white paint on a nearby wall of the youth club (see fig. 1.3). Such markings drew upon the conventions of far-Right graffiti that had been previously found in the locality (fig. 1.4-1.6) but instead emphasised locality above nationhood, street-based violence above political organisation. The research group embodied forms of whiteness in the verbal and visual styles of dress code, body language and discourse. As such, the Skinhead look is a body styling display that choreographs white working-class masculinity as powerful and threatening.

According to the police and local residents, the Kempton Dene Skins were influenced by a youth in his early twenties called Adam, who was continually in and out of prison. He featured as a key actor in many of the violent narratives told by the youth where it appeared ‘doing time’ bolstered masculine reputations in the locality of the working-class peer group. Mr Sidhou, a local Sikh shopkeeper who was himself a frequent recipient of the group’s racism, explained how the severe ‘ex-con’ haircut of Adam was quickly reproduced among male youth. He notes how Adam ‘had a shave of a different type’, a particularly short Skinhead style the group sought to emulate: ‘The others, four or five, shaved their hairs exactly to match his style’, he concluded. Collective simulation of white masculinity is important. This goes some way to explaining desired investments in the area as ‘hard’, ‘that’s what everyone has down ‘The Dene, a Skinhead’. The concept of Skinheads as representative of the community was to become a consistent theme in the accounts of the Kempton Dene males.

At the same time, the Skinhead look formed an ensemble of male labouring culture. The overlap between the spirit of manual work and masculine forms of identification come together in the style of the Skinhead. As Pearson (1976b:206) writes, ‘The skinheads’ uniform (boots, braces, cropped hair) was almost a caricature of the working dress of the model working man, and in their hooliganism and their ‘aggro’



*Fig. 1.3 Popular racism by white youth in Kempton Dene*



*Fig. 1.4 'England for whites' : organised racism in Kempton Dene.*



*Fig. 1.5 Evidence of far-Right activity on the estate*



*Fig. 1.6 White Power, National Front and Anti-Paki League symbols turned towards Asian shopkeepers.*

the skinheads seemed to reaffirm the working class values of manliness and toughness'. The close, 'ex-con' haircut is, then, not only functional but it can articulate multiple, masculine fantasies of existence related to manual labour, militarism, prison identity and 'hardness' (Knight, 1982). For the Kempton Dene males the cut also signified a 'mean look': they were 'ruff 'n' tuff', not to be 'messed with'. Although the cut connects up with elements of working-class manual labour, significantly, none of the young men interviewed were actually in employment at the time. Thus, it was the *fantasy* of the macho style that was particularly attractive. Cohen (1972:25) has accurately described such 'machismo' as 'the unconscious dynamics of the work ethic translated into the out of work situation'. Here, the Skinhead haircut is consciously emblematic of working-class identifications and a broader, bourgeois social alienation. Perhaps the cut itself can be viewed as a cultural register for the 'hard times' of nineties Britain, and thereby be said to reveal a certain naked vulnerability: the bald truth of a bleak future<sup>79</sup>.

For the respondents, the macho-class dimensions of the cut pertinently drew upon the *already* established image of the Skinhead as male, working class and violently racist. Critically, the 'trademark' was a socially recognisable symbol of White Power in the Kempton Dene context where other youth regarded the young men as racist extremists by dint of their communal style. However, few elements of older Skinhead style remained in the dress codes of the Kempton Dene males, though students in a local school referred to them as part of the 'bomber jacket brigade'<sup>80</sup>. Skinhead style as a manifestation of white pride is, at once, structured in contradiction. Hebdige (1987) notes how Skinheads symbolically 'bleached' the black roots embedded in their stylistic identities:

Even the skinhead 'uniform' was profoundly ambiguous in origin. The dialectical interplay of black and white 'languages' (dress, argot, focal

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<sup>79</sup> This underlying vulnerability may be better understood when we consider that the shaven appearance is also associated with babies, wasted drug-users and patients undergoing chemotherapy. It was also alleged to be a style taken up by the Luddites. The Luddites were artisans who destroyed nineteenth century industrial machinery as they feared it would make their skills redundant.

<sup>80</sup> Bomber jackets and flight jackets were part of Skinhead uniform in the 1970s, with the most popular styles being olive green and black (see Marshall 1994).

concerns: style) was clearly expressed in the boots, sta-prest<sup>81</sup> and severely cropped hair: an ensemble which had been composed on the cusp of the two worlds, embodying aesthetic themes common to both (Hebdige, 1987:57).

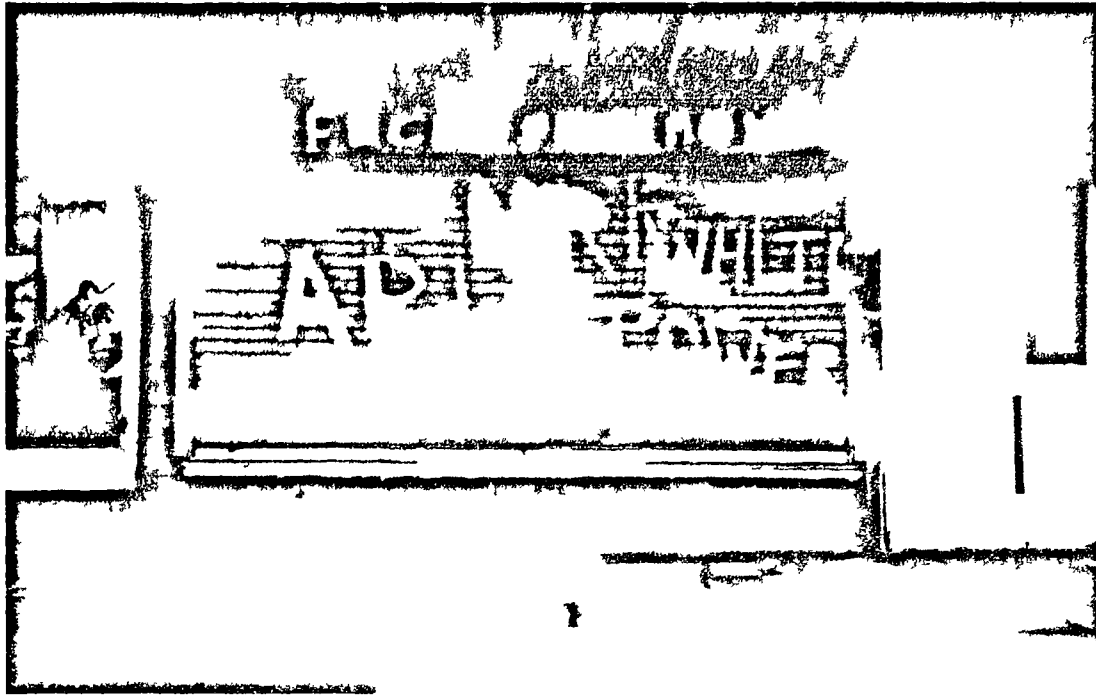
The haircuts of the Kempton Dene males ranged from the 'no.1' (the severest grade on an electric shaver), through to 'crew cuts' and 'flat tops'. These cuts draw upon the black 'soulboy' look of the mid-1960s, so as a motif of white authenticity remain highly suspect. Effectively, the genuine 'trademark' that the Skins hope to achieve only produces a synthetic whiteness, a style fabricated through black-white interaction. Rather, the Skinhead style remains, to all purposes, an inverted parody of blackness, what Kobena Mercer (1994:123) has compared to 'a photographic negative'. Here, the shadowy image of a Black 'Other' is the film through which whiteness is constituted. In other words, essentialising blackness to trace and locate an authentic white being only produces another ephemeral imitation - a copy of a copy. It seems to me that behind the dazzling dance of the paleface may lurk the smudged shadow outline of black history.

In this sense, at a symbolic level the Kempton Dene Skins were engaged in a number of stylistic rituals to convey themselves, however ambiguously, as white. Moreover, at the level of action they were involved in the 'doing' of white ethnicity through the enactment of explicitly racist activity. For the participants in this research, racist graffiti became a key spatial practice for exhibiting white ethnicity (see fig.1.7). The 'geometry of menace' is then worked out simultaneously on the body and on the social landscape. Choreographing white masculinity through Skinhead style is about costume, bodily performance and collective spatial action. Thus, Nicola (15 years) explained how the symbolic dress code of the Skins could combine with anti-social activities to present the hard face of white hostility. She explains, 'Yeah, they're in the NF ... and they write it all down the walls and on the roads and everything and they wear green jackets with the orange inside which is the NF coat<sup>82</sup>. School

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<sup>81</sup> A particular straight-cut of Levi jeans.

<sup>82</sup> Despite the dress code and graffiti practices of the Kempton Dene males, they were not in the National Front Party.



*Fig. 1.7 Local and national racist graffiti.*

students indicated that this would accompany the wearing of 'White Power' badges and the use of neo-Nazi stickers, though none of these were evident during interviews<sup>83</sup>. However, the use of racist symbols was to play a key part in finally removing the young men from the youth club. During a trial period in which their behaviour was under scrutiny, the Skins scrawled various National Front insignia on club walls, posters and the pool table, an act that resulted in a final expulsion.

Moreover, the trial period had been instigated in a direct bid to curb racist violence. The Skinheads had been suspended from using the youth club facilities after a 'paki-bashing' rampage had taken place in a large park late at night. The event was part of a city-wide youth club night excursion involving other clubs from the inner-city<sup>84</sup>.

<sup>83</sup> This may have been because explicit racism was not tolerated in the youth club. Furthermore, it is likely that these motifs of whiteness were specifically deployed near the local school, where harassing black pupils outside the school gates became a regular practice of intimidation.

<sup>84</sup> An annual 'night ops' expedition which involved basic orienteering skills was to be conducted in a park. This competition involved other youth clubs and was felt to be an opportunity for young people to stay out all night without feeling threatened. The Skinhead youth took advantage of this situation and proceeded to attack Asian youth from other clubs.

The Skins appeared unapologetic about their actions and in retrospect only conceded to behave better in the future to regain access to the youth club. The subsequent racist vandalism of the club also severed my research links with the Skinheads. However, in the time leading up to this event it was clear that the young men had a repertoire of narratives relating to racist violence. Such stories included a variety of physical skirmishes with Mr Sidhou the Asian shopkeeper; tales related to the harassment of black children and their white friends as they departed a nearby school; and some horrifically violent altercations with a black family who had come to live in Kempton Dene before being ousted<sup>85</sup>. In this regard the Kempton Dene Skins recognised that there were occasions when the Skinhead look had to be backed up with direct racist violence. Beyond the semiotics of style the embodied activities of the Skinheads remained paramount. Alongside this tendency to extreme male bravado, the Skins frequently expressed a more casual attitude to racial intolerance.

Mark (16 years): You get people, like one black kid saying things like, 'Oh I'm gonna batter 'im, he's a white blah blah. Thinks he's hard 'cos he's got a Skinhead', all this. And that's what everyone says. Then you come face to face with them, give them a smack. If they ask for it, they get it back.

In this way to be a Skinhead meant being 'genuinely', not just symbolically, 'hard'. As Mark explains, this meant not just being someone who 'thinks he's hard' but, rather, someone who has the wherewithal to act upon this self-representation. In this respect the show of white ethnicity, as established through the practice of racist language, violence and graffiti, was most emphatically embodied in the subcultural style of Skinheadism. As Robbie (15 years), a heavily built Skinhead explained, 'The English fight for their territory ... That's why we want them [blacks] out of this country'. We will now consider in detail the wider perceptions held by the Kempton Dene Skins towards ethnic minority groups. In particular I will attempt to tease out some of the

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<sup>85</sup> Following a series of tit-for-tat reprisals involving weapons that took place between the Skinheads and inner city black youth who came to the estate to support the family, the issue of racist violence finally came to a head. During a conflict outside a chip shop in the estate a black baby was dropped and had its face stamped upon. The event culminated in police intervention and the city council carried out the request for the family to be reallocated.

contradictions that emerged in young men's accounts. Despite the overbearing manner in which the subculture masqueraded as white, the group contained two males from 'mixed-heritage' backgrounds. We will explore how the Skins justified their friendships with these peers and identify the contradictions that arose. The ambivalence was especially acute when the crossroads of race and sexuality converged. At these moments the techniques used to regulate white ethnicity came to light and so disclosed the contemporary 'making' of whiteness in an outer-city locality.

### **Inauthentic Whites? Fear, Desire and Sexual Contradictions**

‘The white man’s unadmitted - and apparently, to him unspeakable - private fears and longing are projected onto the Negro’.

James Baldwin (1985:375).

Throughout the ethnography the Skinhead subculture simultaneously expressed horror and fascination with black sexuality, an ambivalence which Frantz Fanon (1970) captures in his renowned couplet, *'fear/desire'*. This process was evident in relation to a favourite programme at the time, the television screening of Hanif Kureishi's novel, the *Buddah of Suburbia* (1970). Set in 1970s Britain, the production explores issues of Hippy spirituality, gay and interracial sexuality - the very themes the youth club males stridently detested. Although this series represents the very *antithesis* of the white suburban utopia the Skins were trying to evoke it retains a curious, collective appeal. The Skins claimed to be viewing the series to 'watch the shaggin'', yet in many ways the programme was a depiction of their darkest fears, an apocalyptic suburban nightmare. Although the young men could insert themselves into a discourse of rampant heterosexuality in this instance in order to account for their contradictory desires, the technique was not always effective. The most pertinent example of this occurred when group members were asked if they would date someone of a different colour. While the young white males were adamant that they found black sexuality repulsive, the cohesion of this white viewpoint was challenged by Calvin and Leonard, two mixed-heritage youth who remembered a previous



conversation with one of the group members<sup>86</sup>. This revelation opened up several ambiguities of whiteness, sexuality and racism.

*Would you go out with somebody who wasn't the same colour as you?*

Robbie (White): A nigger?

Mark (White): Wouldn't even entertain one!

Leonard: Entertain!

[...]

Calvin (Mixed-heritage): Daniel would.

Leonard (Mixed-heritage): [*raising voice*] You told us! Janet Jackson, Tina Turner...

Daniel (White): [*grudgingly*] Tina Turner yeah. Not Janet Jackson.

[*Swelling laughter and jeering as Daniel starts to turn red*]

ALL: Blushing!

Robbie (White): Nigger-lover!

In this extract Calvin and Leonard seize upon the contradictory example of Daniel's behaviour and 'shame' him in front of the group. The hatred of blackness he espouses is combined with a covert attraction for black sexuality. Robbie quickly reprimands him as a 'nigger-lover', a regulatory term used to 'police' whiteness and white sexual behaviour. These comments are a form of category maintenance work, a means of policing the sex-race identities of 'Self' and 'Other', as I will later elaborate. Moreover, during the course of ethnography it became evident that Daniel had particularly pronounced racist views. His unflinching racism had led to him being

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<sup>86</sup> Such discrepancies also indicate how the act of group interviewing can consolidate a collective consensus. Subsequently, individual interviews were also conducted from which a more nuanced array of opinions were obtained.

expelled from school for 'paki-bashing'. He casually recalled, 'It's what I got thrown out for, battering pakis. I don't go school anymore'. In the context of his biography, Daniel's virulent racism made his desire for the black body appear all the more ambiguous. The ambivalence of a white identity structured through *fear* and *desire* could, then, erupt to expose multiple contradictions. These contradictions came to the fore in the regulation of sexual practices as the discussion continued.

Mark (White): White boys should go out with white girls; black girls should go out with coons; pakis should go out with pakis.

Leonard (Mixed-heritage): An' half-castes should go out with both!

[...]

Leonard (Mixed-heritage): Who should half-castes stay with?

Daniel (White): Fucking half-castes.

Leonard (Mixed-heritage): There's not many is there?

Robbie (White): Exactly, because no white people would sleep with black people - 'cos they don't like 'em ... Point, point.

Leonard (Mixed-heritage): Fact, fact.

The regulatory performance of white masculinities is revealed in the careful routines young men must adhere to, 'White boys should go out with white girls'. This crude sexual matching acts as a mantra for behaviour and attempts to secure a 'racial' symmetry across a rigid axis of colour/ethnicity. However, the extracts are riddled with multiple contradictions. Firstly, there is an underlying ambiguity that has already seen a white racist male forced into confessing sexual attraction towards the black icon Tina Turner. Secondly, it is the group *themselves* who fracture the mask of whiteness and criticise Daniel. Such was the sense of disruption that Daniel, who had been seated at the front, later removed himself to the back of the room. Here, the

costs of shattering the image of white coherence were most acutely felt. Thirdly, the question of 'who should half-castes stay with?' also poses a dilemma to biological conceptions of race as an inherently pure, distinct set of colour-based categories. This makes Robbie's comment appear all the more ridiculous: 'no white people would sleep with Black people - 'cos they don't like 'em'. Finally a contradiction is seen when Leonard, who has a black father and a white mother, accepts this point as 'fact' thereby sewing together the ragged fabric of white (in)coherence.

The struggle to perform a coherent white masculinity is seen clearly when Daniel's desire for Tina Turner is denounced by the group. Here, white masculinities must be constantly asserted, celebrated or patched up when punctured with such verve. Daniel unsuccessfully attempted to retract his statement about Tina Turner as the conversation developed by claiming, 'she's too old ain't she?' However, the group were unwilling to allow him to retrieve a position of white authenticity and drove him to admit, 'I said she's nice looking'. As these words left his lips Robbie qualified it, 'She's a nigger though', underlining the 'impossibility' of interracial attraction where a strict code of whiteness is in operation. Even in an avowedly racist group there was a continued need to prove white credentials; it appeared that a white identity could never rest, lie still and simply 'be'. Indeed, the taken-for-granted status of white identity as 'natural' is never quite achieved in the Skinhead subculture, forever bound as it is to rehearsals of whiteness. The intense labour involved in cultivating a coherent white English identity suggests the project of whiteness is always underscored by the performance, the need to act, display, exhibit. Instead of conveying a 'natural' white masculinity, the choreographic process suggests whiteness is only given meaning through repetitive, fraught, hyperbolic exhibition. These contradictions suggest that whiteness is itself an activity secured through repetitive dramatisation. Rather than being a stable identity, a point from which actions organically follow, whiteness is made intelligible through the various expressions and activities it claims are 'natural'. It is constituted in and through action where white identities are made to appear creditable through choreographic styling. The performance, which aims to convey an essential whiteness,

simultaneously reveals the process whereby these identities are exposed as parodic reiterations of an imagined form.

The sexual policing of whiteness remained a particularly volatile issue for the Kempton Dene males, who insisted, 'you should stay with your own kind'. Further examples of the regulatory techniques deployed to govern whiteness occurred.

Calvin (Mixed-heritage): If a white bloke sees a white girl with a black guy they might get jealous.

Robbie (White): No they say, 'Oh look at that dirty bitch with a black man'.

Mark (White): That's what I'd say if I saw a white girl with a black man, I'd call her a bitch.

*What about a white bloke with a black girl?*

Robbie (White): Batter 'em.

Mark (White): I'd still call her a bitch.

*You'd call her a bitch and not him?*

Mark (White): I'd call 'em both wank.

Daniel (White): Batter the coon, batter the wipe.

Leonard (Mixed-heritage): The wipe? The ass wipe.

Such hostile reactions to interracial relationships have a longstanding post-colonial legacy within British youth cultures. In his analysis of London Teddy boys T.R. Fyvel declared, 'the sight of a Negro with a white girl may seem like a knife-thrust against their masculinity' (1964:101). In the passage above there is a denial of jealousy for black masculinity, subsequently displaced through violence and sexual

abuse. In the extract white women's bodies become the discursive terrain for asserting white masculinity (see Frankenberg, 1994; Ware, 1993). White women who are potential 'race traitors' are sexually vilified as 'dirty bitches'. Black women, precisely because of their blackness, are already marked as 'bitches' regardless of their sexual behaviour. Meanwhile, white men who transgress the 'racial' symmetry are also said to be risking potential violence. If the Tina Turner extract was an example of the internal 'policing' of whiteness by the Skins, here we see how sex-race boundaries of other young men and women are regulated. The imposition of a variety of sanctions is informative of the differing social costs incurred when challenging whiteness through lived experience. These interpretations suggest a need to unravel the complex intermeshing of whiteness, gender and sexuality.

Some readers may be sceptical as to whether the Kempton Dene Skinheads actually acted on their self-appointed role as guardians of white ethnicity. However, students I interviewed from the nearby school had first-hand experience of being disciplined into whiteness by the Skins. White students cited verbal abuse, physical violence and intimidation as commonplace methods for policing interracial friendships. For example Linda, a white school student who had a black step-father, had been frequently targeted for 'hanging out' with black friends and dating black boys. She described how racism had become interwoven into her own life-experience as a consequence of her social circumstances and her refusal to 'act white'.

Linda: Because my dad's black they started picking on me.

*Anoop: People on Kempton Dene?*

Linda: Yeah. Because last year there was like 17-18 year olds who hadn't got anything to do. So they'd stand outside the gates waiting for 3:30pm., for anybody else that we knew at this school and 'cos all my friends are mainly black I'd come out and catch the bus with them and they'd start saying things and everything. And I could take that it's just when they started throwing things at me. Started throwing snowballs and hitting me in the face and calling me nigger-lover, things like that.

Linda explains how her close relationship with black friends resulted in her white femininity becoming 'devalued' as it was considered 'tainted' by peer-group association. Simon Jones (1988:199-200) describes this as a 'deflected' form of racism where 'racist social constructions could be applied to young whites themselves on the basis of being "race traitors" or "as good as black"'. Ruth Frankenberg found similar discourses operated amongst US women who had black partners. She describes this as the 'rebound effect' of racism (1994:112)<sup>87</sup>. As one respondent in her study declared, 'to have sex with a Black man is like being the worst slut in the world' (1994:71).

The use of terms such as 'nigger-lover', 'nigger meat' or 'paki-lover' was something that I encountered in neighbourhood, school and youth club settings (Chapter 3)<sup>88</sup>. These references are complex forms of abuse; at one level they are rare examples of white ethnic insults, at another they directly implicate black people. In essence these epithets appear to be deriding white youth for not being 'white enough'. A further dimension to the insult concerns the addition of the phrase 'lover' implying the individual is overcome with lust for 'jungle fever'. Here, it is the person who is ascribed the derogatory label 'nigger-lover' who is regarded as having a black fetish. In Chapter 9 we will go on to see how the term 'nigger-lover' was used to denigrate 'race traitors' and a basketball-playing subculture on Tyneside. In the absence of a prominent African-Caribbean settlement in the North East, the phrase was used to describe any type of behaviour that was regarded as 'acting black'. Hence, being a 'nigger-lover' is not just about having sexual relations with blacks (though it may be about that too), but it can further incorporate anyone who is deemed to be 'acting black'. In this sense, the cultural ascription given to colour can become an influential component structuring young peoples' social relations and come to shape friendship

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<sup>87</sup> Frankenberg goes on to define the 'rebound effect' of racism. She claims, 'In suggesting that racism "rebounds" on white women in interracial relationships, I am thinking of a force that owes existence to and direction to an earlier aim and impact, yet retains enough force to wound. The impact of racism on white women is premised on, and shaped by, its effects on their significant others of colour; but though it is related, the impact is neither identical to, nor merely a weaker version of the original impact: it is qualitatively new (1994:112).

<sup>88</sup> Despite the apparent anxieties concerning interracial relationships statistics drawn from the report *Ethnicity in the 1991 census* reveal that over 40% of white people in Britain are either married to, or living with, a black partner.

patterns, courtship rituals, musical preferences and sporting tastes (Chapter 9). This implies a need to move beyond a black/white dualism, towards recognising the varied expressions of racism that may also castigate Asian youth, 'mixed-heritage' people and white youth deemed 'race traitors'. The notion of 'acting black' or 'acting white', that is, behaving in a manner stereotypically associated with ethnicity/colour, was a major theme that emerged from the ethnography. Here, the elaborate corporeal depiction of racialised Others was found to be a primary technique by which the Skinheads could embody whiteness as normative. As we shall find, the injunction to 'act your colour' was a convenient means of separating different ethnic groups whilst maintaining the illusion of white authenticity.

### **'Acting your colour': Corporeal Representations of Ethnicity**

The examination of Skinhead style and activity suggests that white ethnicities can be elaborately sculpted through the enactment of subcultural practice. Here, whiteness was embodied in physical action, demonstrative style and bodily display. Despite the ritualistic cultivation of Skinhead style the young men still maintained that their white ethnicities were the natural outcome of an English way of life. This allowed them to claim their hostile actions were only 'natural' and enabled them to further disparage the enactment of black identities. They maintained that the behaviour of individuals was intrinsically inseparable from their supposed race. These claims notwithstanding, the subcultural respondents added a paradox by insisting that people should '*act* their own colour', thus inadvertently implying that social behaviour and race/colour are not necessarily linked.

Calvin and Leonard each had a black father and a white mother. Their fathers lived in a multi-ethnic quarter of inner city Birmingham, a space in which each of these individuals had established patterns of black friendship. The other Skinheads described Calvin and Leonard unequivocally as 'half castes', or, on occasion, as 'half breeds'. The position of these youth may appear tenuous in the group, as indeed it

was, yet as we have already seen Calvin and Leonard were equally competent at currying favour with their white peers by using 'put-downs' against other members as witnessed in the Tina Turner episode<sup>89</sup>. Moreover, by aligning themselves with white youth in racist activities against Asian shopkeepers, the bonds of friendship were further consolidated. Mr Sidhou, a recipient of much of the racist antagonism on the estate, commented on this peculiar alliance when he compared Calvin and Leonard to performing clowns playing a role for their white ring masters. Once, when the Skins collectively daubed racist graffiti around the estate, Leonard was taken to the police station as he had signed his name below some of the slogans. However, whilst it may appear 'clownish' on the surface to follow the practices of a racist white peer-group this was also, in part, a strategy of survival. As Calvin went on to explain during an individual interview, 'Cos I've mixed in with half of the crowd that are NF and they know I'm alright ... It's like if I didn't mix in with them they'd give me 'assle'. However, such a pragmatic response also concealed an element of uncertainty that tended to surface in individual interviews with these youth.

For Calvin and Leonard to maintain peer-group status it was essential that they were seen to 'act white'. Their precarious situation meant they had an elaborate understanding of ethnic codes of behaviour.

Calvin: When I first come round here I used to dress like the blacks do and when I hang around with them lot I just [copied] them clothes dress. I just lost it. Now I just dress like them [...]

When I go down my dad's end and I see all my old mates I have to act black. So if I say hello to them, because they don't really get on with whites ... I can't go to them and say like, 'Alright', I have to speak in our language like<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> In collaboration with another colleague I have discussed the relation between put-downs, 'piss-taking' and masculinities in the cultures of young men (Kehily & Nayak, 1997).

<sup>90</sup> Other white youth were highly critical of black people's creative responses to multicultural environments. Janice, a white student in Ridgeway Comprehensive, accused her black friend Aisha of acting differently with black peers. She informed me: 'She's trying to put on the accent with them. I don't know why she's doing that, just to get in with them. It is false the way she's doing it because as soon as she's with us that's it, she's different'.



Here, the cultural specificities of dress code, language and style must be carefully adapted to suit the prevailing peer-group situation. While whiteness was purported to be 'neutral', instead it appeared that white identity had to be carefully controlled through regulatory routines. Calvin noted how curbing black style meant holding back on culture, instead whiteness is taken on as mere absence, 'I just lost it'. Moreover, this policing of boundaries extended to bodily behaviour and action. The other Skins talked openly about Calvin and Leonard and tried to rationalise their status in the group. In what has become a familiar racist refrain, Calvin and Leonard were described as exceptional individuals who were 'alright', having little in common with other black youth. Racist ideas concerning (an imagined) black people 'in general' could be kept intact, while the individual friendships the Skinheads had with Calvin and Leonard could be neatly managed. Thus, when confronted with this anomaly, the white youth could elide the glaring contradiction of their racism. I confronted the Skins with regard to their seemingly ambiguous friendship patterns only to find them implicated in a discursive oscillation between ideas of ethnic identity as 'natural' (what you are) and social (what you do).

Robbie: [*Pointing to Leonard*] He hasn't got an attitude. He don't go round like sucking his teeth and talking.

Leonard: Yeah.

Mark: He did in that prison, remember? Flared your nostrils.

Leonard: That bloke had bad breath!

*Anoop: What does that mean, an attitude?*

Darren: He don't act like a black person really.

For the Kempton Dene Skins 'acting black' meant flaring your nostrils, wearing black clothes, speaking in patois, having a pronounced walk, 'sucking' or 'kissing' your teeth. According to Mark, blacks who had a 'bad attitude' tend to 'walk past ya, kiss their teeth, flare their nostrils at ya'. However, deeper questioning revealed that all blacks regardless of their disposition were despised, 'attitude' was merely a rationale for further outrage and discrimination. Soon after the youth club interviews had taken

place, Calvin and Leonard parted company with the Kempton Dene Skins. One of the unintended consequences of our ethnography and 'race talk' may have been to render their position untenable within the group. A local youth worker informed us: 'I think what happened was that you confronted all the contradictions in that group and as a result they couldn't paper over the cracks anymore, or go on like they were just one of the lads'<sup>91</sup>. The Skins regarded the departure of Calvin and Leonard as further evidence that the youth were, in the final instance black and 'just like the rest of 'em'. The issue of 'acting' in accordance with accepted racial stereotypes was a means of confirming white identity. I pursued this theme in discussions with the Skins by asking:

*What do you mean 'act your own colour'?*

Mark: We act like we act, and get all the black people like walking, swinging their fucking arms like fucking apes.

Darren: We wear jeans. Niggers wear cuts in their jeans. Pakis wear pyjamas.

Daniel: And fucking towels.

In this extract, whiteness is consolidated through fixed, identifiable categories of ethnic difference. A key mechanism for enacting whiteness is to assert the cultural difference of racialised 'Others'. Thus, the Skinheads use stereotypical notions of blackness to highlight their own distinctiveness from these social groupings. Indeed, it is through notions of blackness that whiteness is made intelligible. The comments about 'acting your own colour' suggest an inherent way of 'being' white which involves an intrinsically different body schema than those adopted by African-Caribbean or Asian youth. Accordingly, black people were identified as animals who indulge in hyperbolic performances, 'swinging their fucking arms like apes'. In

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<sup>91</sup> Les Back and myself have considered this at length and feel uncertain as to our possible role in facilitating the situation. This example is evidence of the sensitive dynamics researchers encroach upon when conducting ethnographic work with young people. On one level we were concerned that we may have upset the existing peer group relations, while on the other we were aware that this may have been a first step in challenging racism amongst these young people by encouraging the individuals to make personal choices. At the same time, Calvin and Leonard may have left for reasons unbeknownst to us.

contrast the performativity of whiteness was concealed as normative, 'We act like we act'. The discourse disguises the regulatory styling required to sustain these identities and allows whiteness to be presented as the unexamined 'norm' (Jeater, 1992; Bonnett, 1996a; Gillborn, 1996). This neutrality is here represented through the mundane<sup>92</sup>, western symbol of 'jeans', an effect which film theorist Richard Dyer found to portray whiteness as 'emptiness, absence, denial' (1993:141). The denial of white performativity is particularly remarkable in this group when we consider the accomplished choreography required when adopting Skinhead style.

In order to understand the processes used to enact white masculinity, we need to recognise how the discursive production of cultural identity can come to simultaneously 'articulate' dynamics of gender and sexuality. Consequently, the comment that 'niggers wear cuts in their jeans' locates African-Caribbean identities as urban, street-wise ethnicities that are potentially threatening and dangerous, indeed, ape-like. The racist articulation of blackness creates a *hyper-masculine* image of African-Caribbeans. Here, the hidden desires embedded in the white fantasy of black machismo are displaced and instead come to depict blacks as primitive, savage beasts. The ambiguities of these processes have encouraged Stuart Hall to write of how 'fear and desire double for one another and play across the structures of otherness, complicating its politics' (1993:256). The coded street-credibility of young black men operates as a fantasy that is desired and so is subsequently displaced in order to reassert whiteness. The passage alludes to body boundaries where choreographed actions are seen to attribute directly from the supposed race of individuals. This 'unspoken' yet secretly admired black identity is (mis)recognised by the Skins and selectively evoked through the stereotype of the macho, urban, American male.

To interpret the differing representations of Asians, we need to interpret the nuances in the sexual dynamics of racism. Against the hyper-masculine identity of the African-Caribbean is placed the highly *feminised* image of the Asian secured through

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<sup>92</sup> It should be noted that English Skinheads have exerted an exacting influence on the brand, cut and style of denim jeans.

the discursive production of identifiable stereotypes. Here, the subordinate masculinities of Asians are produced through the tropes of 'towels' and 'pyjamas'. In contrast to the cut-up denim dress of African-Caribbean youth - a style which exposes black skin - Asian clothing articles are seen to conceal and cover up the body. Moreover, these items connote softness and domesticity, when juxtaposed to the outdoor clothing of denim worn by whites, and the subversive street-wear of black youth. Here, the turban is identified as a cultural signifier of difference and relegated to an object to wipe yourself with, transforming the Asian into an 'ass wipe'. The stereotype of a weak, effeminate and even homosexual Asian male was evoked during this fieldwork encounter. Hence, a particular moment from the screen production of the *Buddah of Suburbia* was recalled, and used to position my own black masculinity within the group (see Chapter 3).

Darren: He looks like the one off ... *Buddah of Suburbia*.

Robbie: Oh aah - That dirty paki. He gives that bloke a blow job at the end.

Darren: I think it's him.

As Mairtin Mac an Ghaill (1994) has indicated the phrase 'paki', when deployed by masculine peer group cultures, can simultaneously articulate sexual terms of subordination such as 'poofster'. Thus, highly stylised images cultivate black masculinities as either violent/hypersexual in the case of African-Caribbean men, or passive/homosexual in the case of Asian males. In this complex formulation of racism, white masculinity, clothes and behaviour are seen as 'natural'. African-Caribbean identities are represented as savage and dangerous through actions and styles conveying a primitive hypersexual masculinity. Finally, Asian identities are depicted as passive and weak, condensed into an effeminate masculinity that flirts with the homoerotic. As such, the embodiment of whiteness is a process that relies upon recognition with racialised 'Others' to define itself. In so doing, the corporeal practice situates the socio-sexual position of *all* cultural identities, including white. Despite the attempts to convey white identities as 'natural', the description suggests that the embodiment of whiteness is a highly cultivated choreographic performance,

the mode of acting white. The discussions invoke a freezing of ethnicity to accentuate difference. The displacement and ambivalence is further underscored as the responses concerning 'pakis' in 'pyjamas' were made to me, a British Asian researcher who dressed in jeans throughout the interviews.

## **Whiteness and the Discursive Production of Asian and African-Caribbean Identities**

Some ethnic attributes may be idealised because of their positive class and gender associations, whilst others are denigrated. Most typically, of course, many White working-class boys discriminate positively in favour of Afro-Caribbean subcultures as exhibiting a macho, proletarian style, and against Asian cultures as being 'effeminate' and 'middle-class'. Such boys experience no sense of contradiction in wearing dreadlocks, smoking ganja and going to reggae concerts whilst continuing to assert that 'Pakis stink'. Split perceptions, linking double standards of gender, ethnicity and class are increasingly the rule (Cohen, 1988:83).

As I signalled above, Skinhead style developed from Mod subcultures of the mid '60s, and was further influenced by the dance hall scene of Jamaican Rude Boys who donned cropped hair, narrow ankle tapered trousers and smart jackets (see Hebdige, 1987; Ferguson, 1982; Knight, 1982). This literature suggests that the act of dressing as a Skin is a highly ritualistic, symbolic act of self-discovery. In Kempton Dene, the haircut became the main signifier of difference between Skinheads and other youth groups. However, the stylistic elements of Skinhead culture are often ambiguous and have since been creatively re-appropriated by organisations such as the Anti-Nazi League, and contemporary Queer subcultures (Healey, 1996)<sup>93</sup>. Another aspect of this dialogue is the relationship early Skinheads maintained with popular English working-class traditions: work boots, cropped hair, braces, granddad shirts and most especially, the culture of the terraces. Rather than being either a pure emblem of English whiteness, or a simple reflection of Jamaican blackness, Skinhead culture is a

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<sup>93</sup> As Walters notes in a review of Murray Healy's (1996) recent book *Gay Skins*, the skinhead look 'is not fixed; it clearly means different things to different people in different contexts. Yet it is not entirely free-floating: the one thing skinhead style does signify to everybody is 'butch'' (1996:8).

discursive mutation drawn from a series of hybrid interactions and as such, it remains a style in an ever-unfolding process of partial translation.

Thus, the fashion of the Kempton Dene youth re-worked black cultural style yet remained distinct from the 'braces-'n'-bovver-boots' appearance of previous periods. The respondents frequently wore loose checked shirts, training shoes, baggy jeans and hooded anoraks; familiar accessories found in the wardrobes of many African-Caribbean males in the inner-city. The monocultural whiteness the young men attempted to exhibit disguised the hybrid exchanges that occurred in their appropriation of dissonant styles. Consequently, the Skins were engaged in a 'postimperial mode of mimicry' (Mercer 1994:123), adopting elements of black cultural style and synthesising this into an 'homology' (Willis, 1978) of white working-class pride. Where former Skinhead cultures looked to reggae, blue-beat and ska for inspiration; the young men in this study looked to the equally contradictory influence of 'rave', ragga and hip-hop. The alteration in styles of dress and music by contemporary Skinheads in an outer-city estate is possible as these are "plastic" forms not directly produced by the sub-culture but selected and invested with sub-cultural value' (Cohen 1972:23). Thus, hardcore 'rave' music could be appropriated as a white working-class youth culture while its black cultural roots were overlooked<sup>94</sup>. This suggests that Skinhead style has developed, while continuing to be in 'dialogue' *with and against* black culture. The research suggests that Skinhead style remains an ambiguously situated mode of whiteness, where a performance is worked out on the surface of the body and the local territory to discursively enact specific forms of social class, white ethnicity and gender.

In the previous sections we witnessed the complex and contingent friendship patterns that existed amongst the Kempton Dene Skins. At one level, collective identity was reinforced through the presentation of shared values, style and action. At another, the contingency of these relations came to the fore, for example during the Tina Turner

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<sup>94</sup> A further omission remains that the music was also associated with the gay Chicago House scene in the US.

incident when Daniel was momentarily positioned as a 'nigger-lover'. The internal dynamics within this particular male peer-group revealed a continual jockeying for position and a desire to embody what was always a negotiated position of moral authority. Thus, while the subculture presented a monolithic 'white face' of Skinheadism, in actuality this subjectivity was crosscut by multiple and sometimes competing discourses of power. This can be seen in regard to the performance of a competent heterosexual masculinity (e.g. in relation to Tina Turner and the viewing of *The Buddah of Suburbia*), the tenuous friendships with Calvin and Leonard and the contradictions surrounding the ethnic allegiances to black culture. The complex experience of white cultural identity is shown where it is acceptable to watch a film about the coming-of-age of British Asian sexuality in the 1970s but unacceptable to fantasise about Tina Turner! The contingent negotiation of the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable' are dependent upon context, situation and the discursive positioning of the subject. During the Tina Turner incident the Skins were collectively utilising a discourse of white cohesion in the performative moment of interviewing and at this point sexual desire for the Other was taboo.

The loose and fragile identifications made by the Skins with African-Caribbean culture provided for a partial and contingent acceptance of certain forms of blackness. As we have seen, this did not curtail their vehement celebration of whiteness but encouraged a particular brand of white English nationalism that was especially hostile to Asians. I asked why the Skins most especially discriminated against Asian youth.

Robbie: Blacks ain't as bad as pakis.

Mark: We smoke their draw.

Robbie: I'd rather hang around with a black than a paki.

Leonard: Pakis smell.

Robbie: Pakis smell. It's their duty.

The Skins were capable of identifying with aspects of African-Caribbean music, style and culture, 'We smoke their draw'. However, this did not erase animosity towards African-Caribbean people *per se*, as we have seen. Further, cultural affiliations were not extended to Asian youth as they appeared misshapen Others in the jigsaw of multi-ethnic dialogue. As Hebdige explains, the historical influence of black culture upon Skinhead style did little to conceal the underlying racism from sections of the movement:

"paki-bashing' can be read as a displacement manoeuvre whereby the fear and anxiety produced by limited identification with one black group was transformed into aggression and directed against another black community ... Every time the boot went in, a contradiction was concealed, glossed over, made to 'disappear' (1987:58).

Moreover, cultural differences could be used to temporarily align white working class experiences with those found in African-Caribbean culture and thereby distinguish each of these ethnic groups from Asians. Indeed, qualitative school-based research conducted by Gillborn and Gipps (1996) suggests that Asian pupils are the most likely recipients of racist harassment and violence<sup>95</sup>. I attempted to further interrogate the young men on the seemingly arbitrary contours of white discrimination.

*Anoop: What's the difference, [between African-Caribbeans and Asians], I still can't see it?*

Daniel: [*angrily*] 'Cos pakis stink! That's why. Don't they Calvin? 'Cos they wear fucking tea towels...

Robbie: Hankies on their 'ead.

Mark: It's the way they dress. You get Black people that dress like we do. Like they're dressed like we're dressed but pakis, they wear fucking tea cosies don't they?

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<sup>95</sup> This statement should not be misconstrued to imply that other minority groups are less likely to experience racism. Instead, it points to the nuances of racist discrimination. For example, African-Caribbean students are the most frequent recipients of school exclusion.



The interconnections between class, gender and sexuality, and how these dynamics are played out across black bodies, is vital to understanding the complex formation of white ethnicities in urban and suburban contexts. The shifting discourses of racism in this extract are a clear indication of how African-Caribbeans can be included or excluded on the basis of style. Again, white experience is the 'norm' against which 'Others' are judged. Moreover, the production of highly charged stereotypes of Asian and African-Caribbean people enabled whiteness to pass as the undisclosed equilibrium of experience. Subsequently, discussions with the Skins uncovered an extensive grammar of racist terminology with which to abuse ethnic minorities. At the level of discourse the vocabulary associated African-Caribbean people with animals and Asians with the notion of being 'soft' through reference to items such as 'pyjamas', 'towels', 'sandals' and 'teacosies'. The white, male hierarchies are diagrammatically mapped two pages overleaf.

In this respect, the racism of the Kempton Dene Skinheads was articulated through notions of gender, sexuality, class and place. The hostile treatment reserved for all visible minorities regardless of their background was nowhere more apparent than when Daniel remarked, 'I'm not against like coons, against pakis yeah 'cos they smell!'. As the table indicates such comments served to ensure the place of whiteness at the apex of the ethnic hierarchy. Moreover, by reserving the brunt of their antagonism for Asian communities the Skins could better gloss over their contradictory attitudes towards Calvin and Leonard. When questioned about the nature of these interracial friendships the Skins attempted to 'claim' Calvin and Leonard as 'white'.

Daniel: They're alright, his mum's white so ...

[...]

Darren: They're half-castes so they're alright, they've got a bit of white in 'em.

Robbie: Like I say, it's not so much the blacks. It's the pakis. No matter what anyone says I dislike 'em.

Darren: Pakis are like the main ones. All the people round here don't like pakis.

Robbie: It's not so much black. Mostly they don't like pakis.

In this extract the Skins use the biological discourse of race to assert that Calvin and Leonard are 'alright' and legitimate this by adding, 'they've got a bit of white in 'em'. By 'whitening' the identities of their close friends the Skins were able to square the circle of blatant contradiction. And yet at other moments the race discourse could be conveniently reverted to note how anyone who was not of an entirely white-English background had 'a bit of paki in them'<sup>96</sup>. Accordingly, the cultural identities of the peer-group were discursively positioned so that levels of 'sameness' enacted at one moment were liable to fall apart at the next when 'difference' was invoked (see Chapter 3).

### Register of Ethnic Hierarchies

<i>Social Group</i>	<i>Masculine Status</i>	<i>Cultural Style</i>	<i>Perceived 'Roots'</i>
<b>White working-class</b>	Normal (yet ruff 'n' tuff)	Jeans (plain, neutral, regular) Disembodied	White suburbia
<b>African-Caribbean</b>	Hyper-Masculine (yet subhuman, ape-like)	Ripped jeans (street-wise, urban, threatening) Body revealed	Black inner-city
<b>Asian</b>	Effeminate, soft (passive, potentially homosexual)	Pyjamas, towels, hankies, sandals, teacosies(domestic) Body concealed	South Asian sub-Continent

<sup>96</sup> For example, this accusation was aimed at a youth worker of Greek-Cypriot descent.

## Concluding Remarks

I have not intended to suggest that ... political practice necessitates the abandonment of any idea of Englishness or Britishness. We are all, no doubt fond of things which appear unique to our national culture - queuing perhaps, or the sound of leather on willow. What must be sacrificed is the language of British nationalism which is stained with the memory of greatness. What must be challenged is the way that these apparently unique customs and practices are understood as expressions of a pure and homogenous nationality (Gilroy, 1995:69).

As Paul Gilroy implies there are ways of engaging with Englishness that need not regurgitate the narrative of nationalism. However, the empirical evidence collected in an outer-city district of the West Midlands conurbation suggests that a particular section of working-class young men are retreating into white ethnicity as a highly defensive and retentive posture. The young men in this study appeared to be consolidating their masculinities through racist practices in a way that mutually reinforced what Les Back (1996:137) refers to as 'the ideological triangle that places whiteness, Englishness and racism in an interdependent relationship'. Integrating whiteness, Englishness and racism was a means by which the young men could simulate a coherent white working-class masculinity. Here, whiteness became an embodied style, performatively evoked in order to purvey an inner 'truth' beyond the bodily practice of language, gesture and display. The unachievable task of conveying an imaginary white coherence produces an ongoing amount of 'body work'. It appeared that the desperate status of the Skins encouraged them to utilise an exaggerated, 'hyper-whiteness' through bodily practice and public exhibition.

However, the project of whiteness is a masquerade that simultaneously exposes the labour required to sustain this fabrication. This incompleteness and sense of 'lack' calls for the exhibition of a white, working-class masculinity exhibited through repetitive, strategic deployments of racism. The parodic display not only has collective significance but also acts as a self-confirming reiteration of whiteness for the individuals concerned. The choreography of whiteness within Skinhead culture thus fails to assemble an identity that is solid, sure and steadfast. Rather, the act of performance echoes an uncertainty, an inability to truly embody white masculinity. As Hebdige explains, retreat into white ethnicity can become a 'romantic gesture'

(1982:35), a posture that offers working-class males escapism and the illusion of security through masculine performance. The nostalgic performance is seen in the Skinheads' attempt to authenticate concepts of territory, 'style' and ethnic behaviour. At these moments, the young men appear as 'pale warriors' - romantic defenders of an ever retreating, imaginary English working-class culture. The retreat into white ethnicity reveals how whiteness is 'naturalised' and as such, also discloses the process whereby a subculture of working-class males 'do whiteness'.

Even so, 'doing whiteness' was frequently found to be a laborious activity. For the respondents in this study, desire and fantasies of the 'Other' had to be carefully regulated through rigid routines of whiteness. The sexual desire for black icons like Tina, Janet, Whitney - and the covert admiration for the 'hard' street styles of macho black males - bears testimony to the underlying ambivalence of whiteness. Such lapses were continually defended, repaired or denied by the Skins, disclosing the eternal struggle involved in substantiating whiteness. The morbid fascination with the screen production of the *Buddah of Suburbia*, and the verbal and physical retributions delivered to white youth who dated outside their ethnic grouping, indicated that it was at the crossroads of 'race' and sexuality that whiteness was most severely scrutinised. 'Doing whiteness' meant acting white by way of dress code, body language and a range of cultural practices. It was at these moments, when white identity was being so stringently 'policed', that the contours of whiteness became starkly visible. Nevertheless, the highly sculpted white ethnicities, so intensely refined by the young men in this study, were founded in part on pale imitations of black culture. The markings of this influence were detectable in a spectrum of bodily consumption: hairstyles, dress codes, language, cannabis use, musical preferences. The 'authentic' whiteness that the Skins hoped to achieve meant bleaching these 'anomalies' from existence. However, the indelible stain of blackness on Skinhead style, and the lived cultures of West Midlands youth generally, make total erasure a distinct impossibility.

The continual struggle to effect a white coherence, where daily actions carry the shadow of a haunting ambiguity, throws up glimmers of hope for political action<sup>97</sup>. According to Jeater (1992) the moment of reinventing whiteness outside nationalist

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<sup>97</sup> Phil Cohen (1993) has pin-pointed the lack of fixity between organised racism and popular youth racism 'to be a real cause for celebration' for anti-racist practitioners.

discourses may have passed, though 'new' ethnicities which critically appraise whiteness are undoubtedly in occurrence (Jones, 1988; Back, 1996). This suggests reconfigurations at a grass-roots level are a cultural possibility, where 'Brit-pop' youngsters may already be looking for variations on or within white, Anglo-ethnicity. What has to be challenged is the racist formation of white ethnicities and the material deprivation that makes a Pale Warrior stance so attractive for some working-class males. Anti-racism must now pay heed to the oppressive choreography of whiteness, to recognise how this combines with working-class frustration and the dynamic culture that resides in masculine peer groups. The present task for anti-racism as we enter the millennium is to provide alternative performative rhythms, in tune with the lived experience these young people.

In the following quartet of chapters based on research carried out in the Northeast of England, this issue will be addressed. The chapters investigate the potential subject positions available to white youth outside the limited discourses of racism and nationalism witnessed here. The research illustrates the multiple versions of white identity exhibited upon Tyneside and in particular examines how young people are negotiating white ethnicity in the contemporary socio-economic climate. Once again, local identities were found to be an especially important resource for young people. Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate how the radical tradition in working-class culture can be better harnessed for an inclusive, collective riposte to white racism. In Chapter 6 a close analysis of the local history of migration, racism and anti-racism in Tyneside is undertaken. The chapter explores the geographical specificity of the region and provides a context for the empirical research discussed in Chapters 6, 7. Indeed, it is argued that any understanding of white ethnicity must take into account the social and economic history of the region as well as the patterns of migration and settlement. The historical research indicates that a generalised notion of the area as simply the 'white highlands' obfuscates the diverse, hidden histories of settlement to the region. Moreover, it was found that while racism may flourish in mainly white areas such as the North East this has also been met with resistance. Indeed, the organic, community responses to racism and social class oppression made by local people may yet yield to new configurations of white English ethnicity beyond the limited identifications found in this chapter.

**Who is Geordie?**

**A Social History of Ethnicity and Migration in the Northeast  
of England**

**Chapter 6**

## **Introduction**

This chapter - the first of a Tyneside quartet - offers an historical introduction to the empirical research carried out in Chapters 7, 8 and 9. In certain respects it functions as the glue binding these sections together as it is argued that the contemporary experience of young people needs to be placed within a local understanding of the past. The use of regional history has been included to provide a context for Englishness and white identity in Tyneside, and is also a response to the recent call in the journal *Race & Class* to situate youth responses within the immediate history of the locality (see Fekete, 1998). The use of historical documentation is rarely utilised within empirical research and has led one sociologist to comment how, 'if we turn to ethnographic studies, we find that historical data is neglected' (Burgess, 1982). Moreover, the inclusion of an historical perspective offered a valuable method of triangulation with which to 'make sense' of the ethnographic responses found at an institutional level. This is the first of four chapters based in the Tyneside conurbation within the Northeast of England. It aims to offer an insight into the history of ethnicity and white cultural identity within the region.

### **'Beyond the Pale': Deconstructing the White Highlands**

A critical analysis of whiteness should address its historical legacy and existing complicity with racist exclusion and oppression, but it is equally important that such an examination distinguish between whiteness as a racial practice that is antiracist and those aspects of whiteness that are racist (Henry Giroux, 1997b:310).

Dynamics of race and ethnicity are contextually contingent, they are embedded in the culture of their geographical location, and come to operate differently within specific sites and institutions (the school, the street, the pub, the domestic home). Located in the Northeast periphery of England, the Tyneside conurbation epitomises the extremities of a British, Northern way of life. The distinctive regional identity of Tyneside, combined with its proximity to the Scottish border, has seen a greater emphasis given to Northern peculiarities by locals at the expense of an homogeneous

'Englishness'. Some writers have noted how the Northeast concept of Englishness 'has long been ambivalent' and that this version of the nation 'was high up and far away' (Carr, 1992:143). David Bean (1971:4-5) identifies the shipping links the region maintains with Northern Europe, and notes that 'Tyneside isn't really part of England at all ... being out of Britain altogether and somewhere in Pan-Scandinavia'. Reflexive commentators such as Younger (1992:168) soon realised, 'I found myself unable to describe myself as English' and so substituted localised terms such as 'Northumbrian' or 'Geordie' for nationhood. Others have gone as far as regarding Northeast peoples as the 'Unenglish' (Taylor 1993), claiming they do not fit into Southern definitions of nationhood, premised on the rural 'home counties', and, as such, regionalism remains a reaction to this<sup>98</sup>. Indeed, Taylor (1993) describes the area as England's "foreign country" within. Moreover, Lanigan (1996) has suggested how this argument can explain the appearance in print of explicit rejections of Englishness and the incompatibility that has arisen between regional and national culture. Consequently, in their study of Northeast youth (16-25 years) Coffield *et.al.* (1986) consciously entitled their book *Growing Up at the Margins* to convey the peripheral sense of the locale as a neglected, economic outpost.

Given the tenuous relationship the North East has with the nation at large, it may seem strange that the region is widely recognised as a bastion of English whiteness, far removed from the urban, multi-ethnic metropolis. Writing about perceptions of the North East in the late nineteenth century Robert Colls (1992:3) notes how, ""Northernness" was not the same as "Englishness". Paul Gilroy has also written of the dissonance between national and local identities such as 'Geordie' to remark, 'regional or local subjectivities simply do not articulate with "race" in quite the same way as their national equivalent' (1995[1987]:54). Despite these overt tensions, the local and the national are not entirely exclusive categories, but co-exist in a complex inter-dependent relationship with one another. It is suggested that some of the most nationalistic sentiments of the nation large, are *translated* onto the local culture as a

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<sup>98</sup> In their recent study of two Northern towns Taylor *et.al.* (1996) comment, 'the North has always been a region that is defined by its residual and subordinate relation to London and the South-East'. According to these social geographers, 'Being "of the North", in this sense has always involved a recognition that one is "peripheral"' (1996:18).



type of 'parochial patriotism'. The majority of ethnographic accounts I collected displayed a marked identification with the region to such an extent that 'Geordie' was regarded as an overriding ethnicity within the context of Britain. Young people were keen to assert commonalities of language, behaviour, beliefs and values as evidence of 'Geordie' ethnicity, and often remarked on the disparities with other localities, especially London and 'the South' generally. They were keen to stress the distinctive nature of being 'Geordie'.

*Anoop: What's distinctive about being a Geordie?*

Alan: The language.

Danielle: Language!

Alan: Well the accent.

*Anoop: But there are some different words?*

Danielle: 'Gannin'.

Alan: Aye, we say, 'aye'.

Lucy: We'd say, 'Eeeh, ya wanna pack't in!' or summit. Say things like that.

Furthermore, Robert Hollands (1995:12) in a study of Newcastle's flamboyant nightlife equates the term 'Geordie' directly with a 'strong patriarchal and masculine occupational identity'. That the label should conjure up images of working-class manhood is no historical coincidence. Literally, 'Geordie' meant *pit-worker* at a time when the phrase 'carrying coals to Newcastle' radiated with regional prosperity as the colloquialism entered common parlance<sup>99</sup>. The way that notions of locality have dovetailed with manual labour in this way is nowhere more apparent than during the miners' strike of 1984-85 when neighbourhoods mobilised around the slogan 'Save our Pits! Save our Communities!' Today, 'Geordie' is more likely to be represented *geographically* than through labour identifications and incorporates people from Newcastle, the Tyne Valley, Northumberland, Wearside, South Tyneside and

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<sup>99</sup> For a complete discussion of the nuances within the terminology see Colls and Lancaster (1992:ix-xvi).

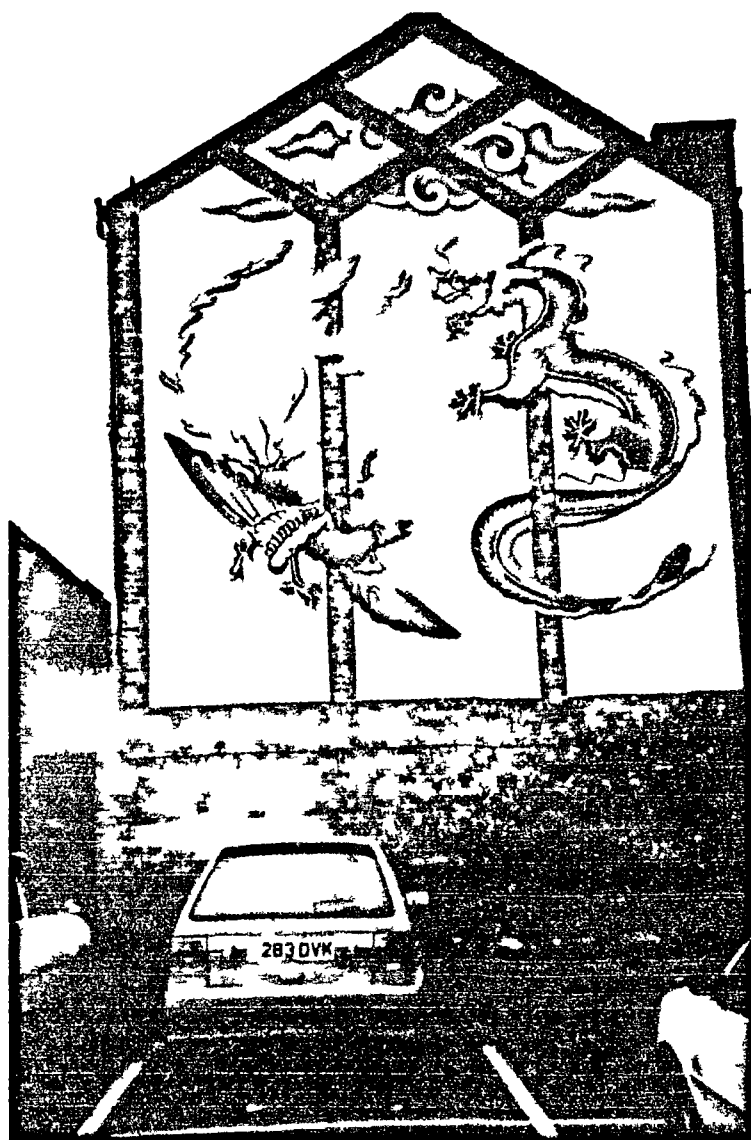
Durham. In the following three empirical chapters I am mainly concerned with the construction and contestation of 'Geordie' in the Tyneside conurbation where this study has been conducted. Here, it appears the geographical re-definition of the term has also been extended to have a broader *cultural* set of meanings.

With a population of approximately 400,000 the ethnic composition of the city of Newcastle reveals a white majority of almost 96%, confirming that around 383,000 residents would have been classified as white in the last 1991 census reading. However, a closer inspection of the overall social geography of Tyneside sees black migrant communities concentrated within the West End district of the city, rising to 11.3% in the Wingrove ward. Notably these communities are drawn from the South Asian sub-continent including Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi peoples. The convergence of minority groups within the West End section of the city is therefore somewhat at odds with the depiction of the region as a cluster of 'white highlands' (Bonnett, 1993a:136). In a fascinating study of Asian youth in West End Newcastle, J.H. Taylor contradicts conceptions of the city as monolithically white.

There were plenty of Pakistanis to be found drinking Exhibition Ale or Newcastle Brown in the pubs of the area, particularly the Bay Horse, on Westgate Hill, and the High Elswick Tavern (known to Asians as the 'small publi') tucked away between Gloucester Road and Cromwell Street. In the Tavern they played dominoes. In the Bay Horse they monopolised the upstairs dartboard. Many Asians also patronized the Queen's, in Campbell Street (1976:75).

This stark ethnic differentiation between the West End quarter and the rest of Tyneside has led Beatrice Campbell (1993:74) to depict the sector as 'the only place in the city that resembled a cosmopolitan, modern metropolis'. Another zone of immigrant residence can be found around Stowell Street, where South East Asian migrants, predominantly of Chinese and Vietnamese heritage, have established a number of restaurants and small businesses. This city-centre quarter represents Newcastle upon Tyne's 'Chinatown', a space Patrick Ely (1997:14) depicts as 'the

stage upon which two separate cultures meet and interact, drawn together through their common desire for Chinese food' (see fig. 1.8-1.9). Nevertheless, racism against South East Asian migrants was found to occur in the wider Northeast district of England. At an empirical level school-students reflected upon the casual racism sometimes expressed towards these Tyneside communities.



*Fig. 1.8 Images of Tyneside's so-called 'Chinatown'.*

James (10 years): Chinese people get a lot of hassle as well because people think they can act hard, cos they've learnt all this karate stuff and that. Everyone jus' call 'em [names].

*Anoop: So what gets said?*

James: 'Karate man', 'slanty eyes' and stuff like that.

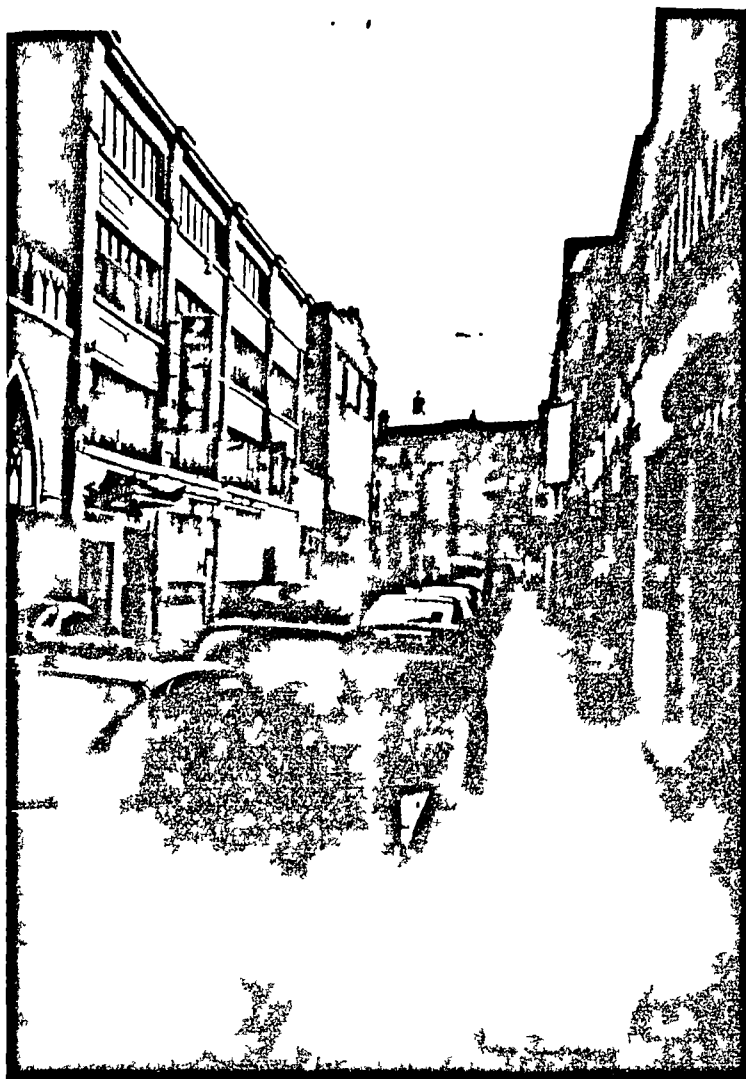


Fig. 1.9 Images of Tyneside's so-called 'Chinatown'.

Such hostilities sharply contradict the fallacy of a 'no problem here' attitude that presumes that racism is absent from mainly-white areas (Gaine, 1987, 1995). The image of South East Asian people as 'Oriental experts' in martial arts is a recurring myth in Western imagination as David Parker (1998) reveals in his book *Through Different Eyes*. In another volume *From Ta'izz To Tyneside*, Richard Lawless (1995) traces the history of Arab migration to the area. Carr has also documented the settlement of Arab communities in South Shields and has gone so far as to claim that at least here, 'Black Geordies are "Geordies" first' (1992:132). In contrast, J.H. Taylor's (1976:211) earlier research in Tyneside found that virtually all Indian and Pakistani youth 'felt themselves to be Asians, not English'. The term 'Geordie' itself

has masculine, working-class connotations that will be explored in the following chapter. Moreover, the phrase bespeaks whiteness. Thus, within the collection *Geordies* (Colls & Lancaster, 1992), an article by Barry Carr on long-established migrant communities to the North East, is not insignificantly entitled 'Black Geordies'. Here, 'Geordie' must be prefixed by the distinguishing mark of colour if the term is to become inclusive to minority groups. Hence, the assumption is that those essays in the collection without the prefix 'black' are ultimately about the experiences of the white ethnic majority. No prefix of colour is required to demarcate 'Geordies' as white; this is encapsulated in the very term itself.

Whereas information pertaining to the numbers of black peoples in Tyneside can be found there remains as yet no statistical breakdown relating to the number of 'white' foreign migrants from Irish, Polish, Italian, German and Scandinavian backgrounds who have all settled in the region over the years<sup>100</sup>. The fact that many Tynesiders disassociate themselves from rigid definitions of Englishness may have furthered the integration of these otherwise 'invisible minorities'. Yet inspite of this apparent invisibility there is evidence to indicate that white minority ethnic expression has been etched into the landscape in other ways. Thus, we find a burgeoning number of Gaelic pubs in Newcastle upon Tyne as well as a vast range of authentic Italian restaurants near the Quayside district and beyond. Meanwhile, nestling along the stretch of the River Tyne somewhere between Gateshead and South Shields is found Hebburn, a town that was formerly an Irish speaking colony. Today, visitors are more likely to frequent the Irish Centre which can be found on St. Andrews Street in the central part of the city of Newcastle, near the so-called 'Chinatown' quarter (fig. 2). A Jewish synagogue in the plush residential district of Jesmond is further testimony to the long-standing survival and influx of 'white' migrant groups (see fig. 2.1). However, aside from shared pockets of migrant settlement, the civic face of Tyneside remains hauntingly white.

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<sup>100</sup> There are plans for census data in the future to account for Irish ethnicity.



*Fig.2 Tyneside's Irish Centre, St Andrew's St., Newcastle upon Tyne.*

#### *A most parochial patriotism: Racism and regionalism*

Despite the symbolic disassociation with 'Englishness' that is a feature of much 'Geordie' life, a legacy of racist struggles pepper the locality to the present day. There is documentation of anti-Irish race riots in 1851, arising from the migratory movements of rural folk from Ireland to the North East during the potato famine. Notably the Bigg Market district of Newcastle was, along with Benwell, a popular site for fascist activity in the 1930s. There are also reports of small-scale anti-Italian riots taking place in the North East during 1940 involving the districts of Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Newcastle upon Tyne. Evidence of anti-Semitic violence can also be traced as Jewish communities came to settle in Newcastle and Gateshead. Local legends in the North East are also inscribed with racial epithets (Chapter 8). In popular folklore it is commonly said that during the Napoleonic wars a monkey was washed up on the shores of the coastal town of Hartlepool, mistaken as a French spy, and then summarily hung by local North-east crofters! As we have already seen, myths concerning ethnic minority communities frequently represent these figures through the uncivilised symbol of the ape. The notion of the foreigner as uncivilised



*Fig.2.1 Jewish synagogue, Jesmond.*

could be used to make racialised comparisons in the district. Thus, a so-called 'flowering' of empire can be detected in a number of local period accounts. In Mary Wade's memoir's *To the Miner Born*, the author recalls a school-visit to the North East Coast Exhibition (1929) which took place on the Town Moor in which some 500 firms exhibited<sup>101</sup>. The author reminisces upon how the finest thrill for the class was reserved for a visit to the 'African village':

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<sup>101</sup> The national display was commemorated in the region with the birth of Exhibition ale.

Despite all the poverty around us, perhaps this was our first injection of a superiority complex. With furniture in our home and desks in our classrooms, surely we were fortunate. Home cooking did not vary much, but leek puddings and tattie was certainly more appetising than anything the Africans were eating (cited in Bourke, 1994:175-176).

While the Exhibition took place in the wake of a depressed local economy, it did not stop parochial pride from blossoming out of the roots of white imperial fantasy. Accordingly, there remained a sense that however bad things were for the civil English working classes in the final reckoning they could always cling to nationhood and whiteness.

But white superiority was not something that all Northeast folk could deploy. Elsewhere in South Shields, early Arab labourers found, 'If the Arabs were working, they were accused of depriving white men of jobs; if they were not, then they were lazy spongers who were a financial drain on the town's ratepayers' (Carr, 1992:137). Closer to the city, J.H. Taylor (1976:226) goes on to remark how, 'anyone with ears can have heard anti-Asian sentiments expressed every day in Newcastle'. In the contemporary setting young 'Geordies' I interviewed also expressed a familiarity with street-based racist interactions.

[11-12 years]

Alan: If some people walk into a shop and say there was a Pakistani bloke there and he's bein' cheeky they'd think all of them are like that, all of them are nasty.

*Anoop: Would there be any trouble?*

Alan: Probably.

*Anoop: Like what?*

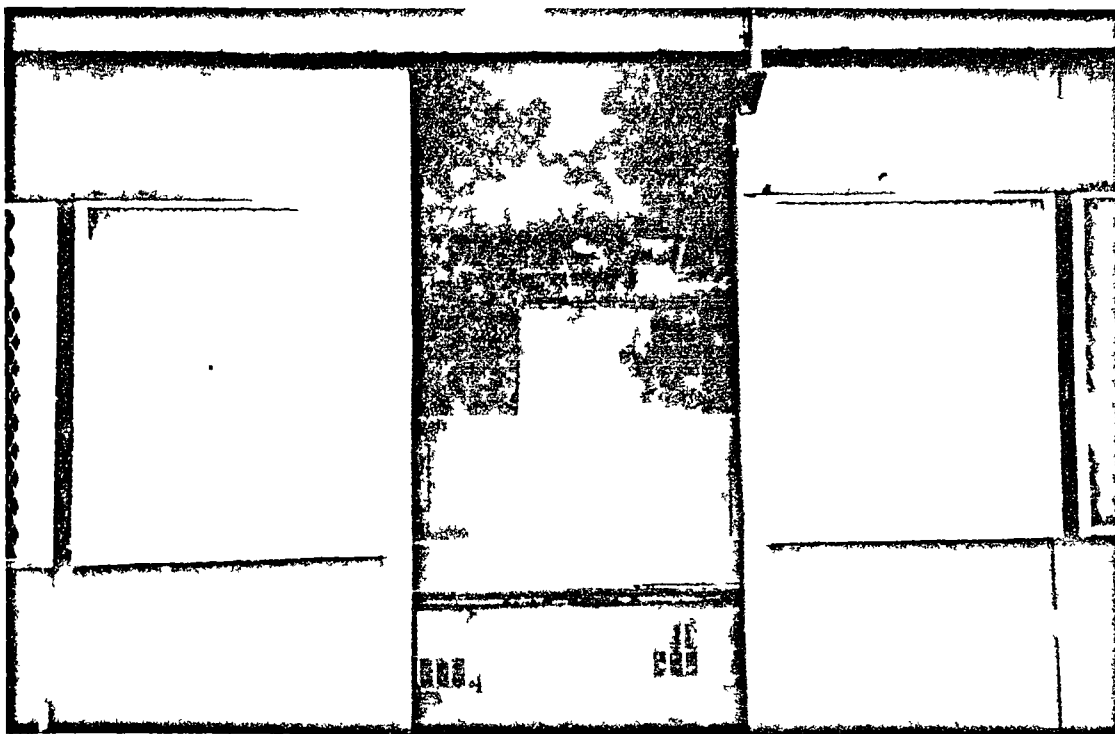
Alan: Probably spray-paint the shop.

Danielle: And get called racist names.

Brett: Smash the windows.



Furthermore, Mould's (1987) study of 'racial' attitudes amongst children of various ages in Tyne and Wear revealed that around three-quarters of the pupils held negative attitudes about black people and from this fraction a third held strongly hostile attitudes. A more recent study involving 62 children in Tyneside conducted by Lara Bath and Peter Farrell (1996:11) presents a slightly more optimistic picture but still concludes with the damning indictment that 'one-third of the students expressed prejudiced feelings'. This would indicate that racism in mainly-white areas is very much alive and that the North East in particular is certainly not immune (see fig. 2.2-2.5).



*Fig. 2.2 Contemporary racism in Tyneside's mainly-white conurbation*

At a local level an ostensibly white image of the region may even be promoted. Sir John Hall, the local multi-millionaire who has financed the resurgence of Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC), has made few apologies concerning the ethnic exclusivity of the 'Toon Army'. In describing his dream of watching eleven 'Geordie' players playing in NUFC colours, this example of fierce regionalism acts as an

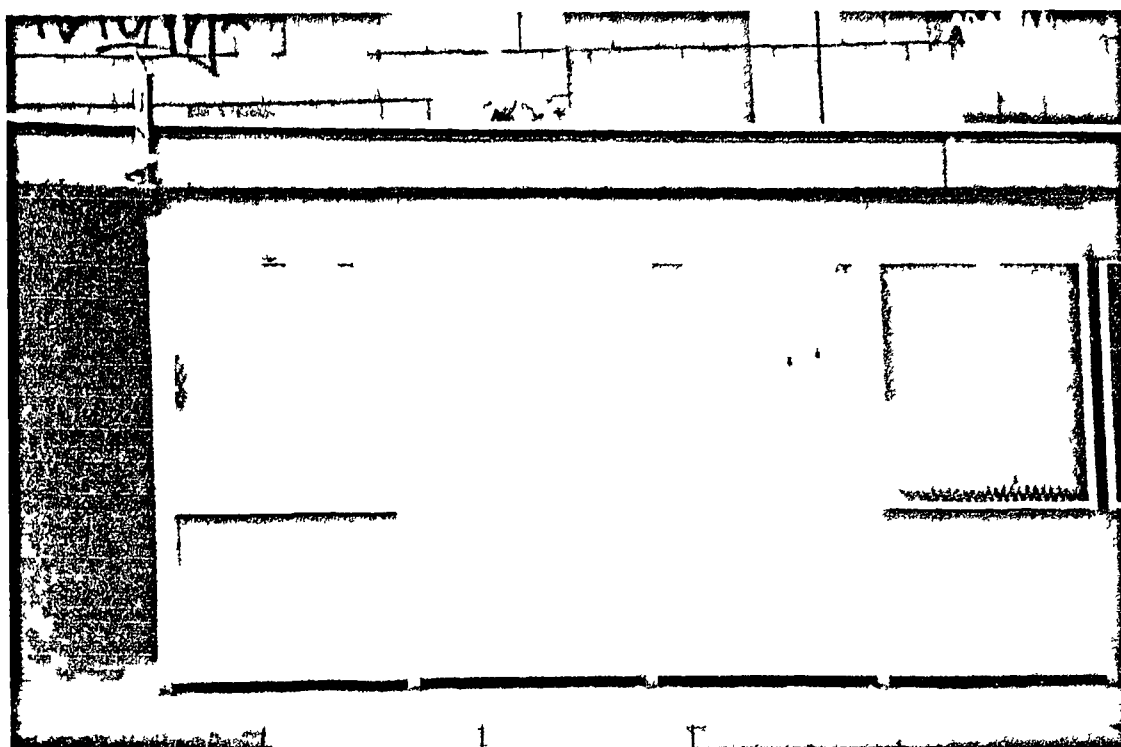
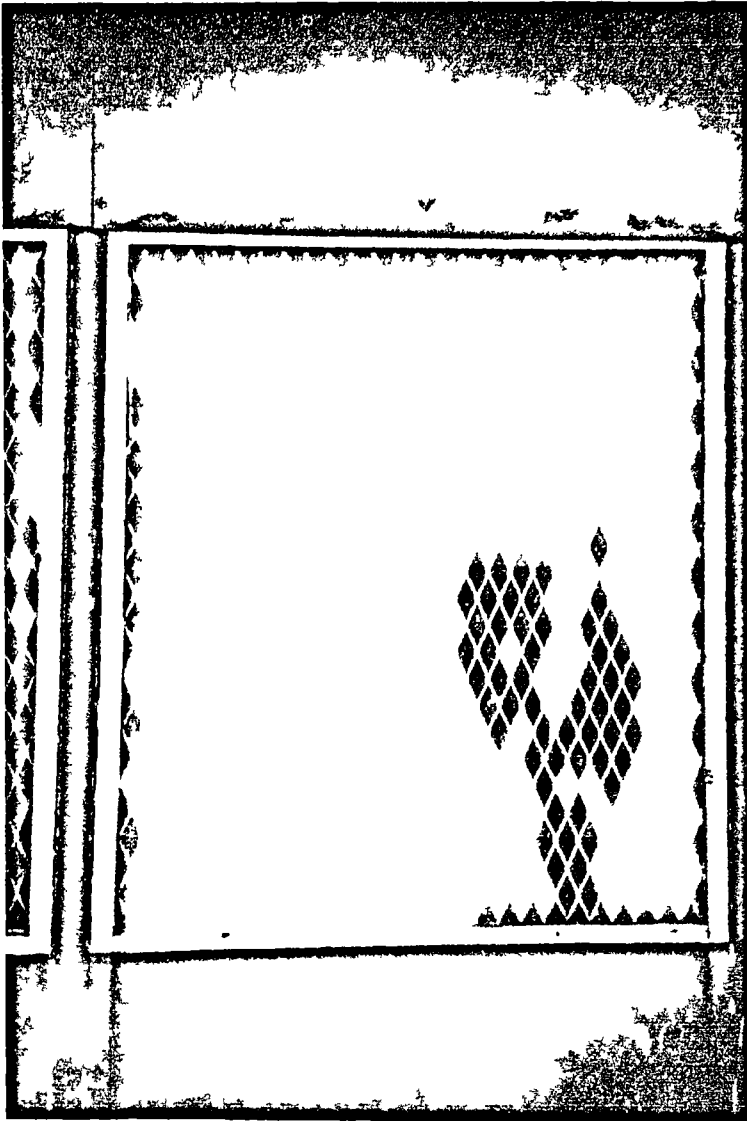


Fig. 2.3 Contemporary racism in Tyneside's mainly-white conurbation

exacting form of belonging<sup>102</sup>. More specifically, Hall's references to what he calls 'The Geordie Nation' are at once a dis-identification with the nation at large (England/Britain), and a re-inscription of these patriotic values at the level of the local. This jingoistic discourse, what I have likened to a type of 'parochial patriotism', draws on a familiar schema of loyalty, origins and racial authenticity, so defining 'Geordie' as an exclusive ethnicity. It was this parochial patriotism that featured most strongly in young people's accounts of cultural identity. The fervent celebration of the 'Great Geordie Nation' along these chauvinistic lines remains problematic in a space Campbell (1993a:162) sadly depicts as a 'region where racism is displayed with a certain pride'. Furthermore, Alastair Bonnett (1993a) has pin-pointed Newcastle United's football ground, St. James' Park in the city centre, as a recruiting ground for far-Right extremists during the 1980s selling local National Front magazines such as the *Newcastle Patriot* and *Geordie Bulldog*, as well as the British National Party's *Lionheart*. Presently, these relations are altering with the widespread influx of black

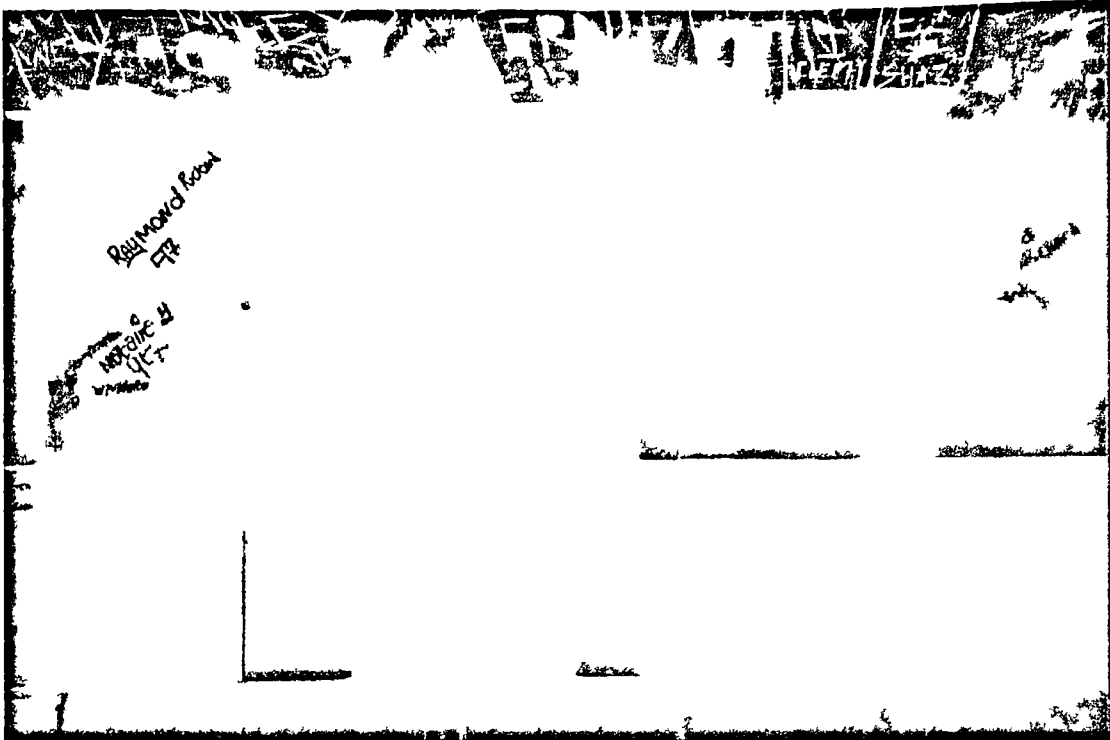
<sup>102</sup> At the time of writing this comment appears all the more inappropriate given the large number of foreign players in NUFC's first team.



*Fig. 2.4 Contemporary racism in Tyneside's mainly-white conurbation*

players, public awareness about racism in football, the commercialisation of the game and the appointment by the NUFC board of a Dutch black manager in Ruud Gullit.

Harvey Tailor's (1992) historical study of sport in the North East implies similar connections between the industrial economy, leisure pursuits and local identity. For example, the early fascination with rowing competitions was seen as a symbolic means by which the region could assert a muscular prosperity against London rowers on the Thames. Here, the river was seen as the life-blood of the region that offered a



*Fig. 2.5 Contemporary racism in Tyneside's mainly-white conurbation*

point for comparison with the nation's capital. The decline of rowing is thereby linked to the reduced significance of working watermen on the Tyne and 'submergence by the great leviathan of football' (1992:120). The fusion of sport and local identity is nowhere more apparent when one considers how the 1862 spectacle of the Blaydon Races has become immortalised as a regional anthem. However, by the 1890s local sporting pride had begun to shift towards football, where 'it took only a short time to become integrated into the regional male identity' (1992:120). Meanwhile, Bean has described soccer as 'Tyneside's greatest modern passion' (1971:208). A century on, football is still the 'great leviathan' of sporting consumption in the North East, though rugby and basketball are gaining in popularity with Newcastle boasting its own teams. Moreover, St. James' Park occupies an unusual location in the heart of the city centre<sup>103</sup> and is of core significance to an area where regional identity has been concentrated around local infrastructures such as the factory, the shipping yard, the colliery.

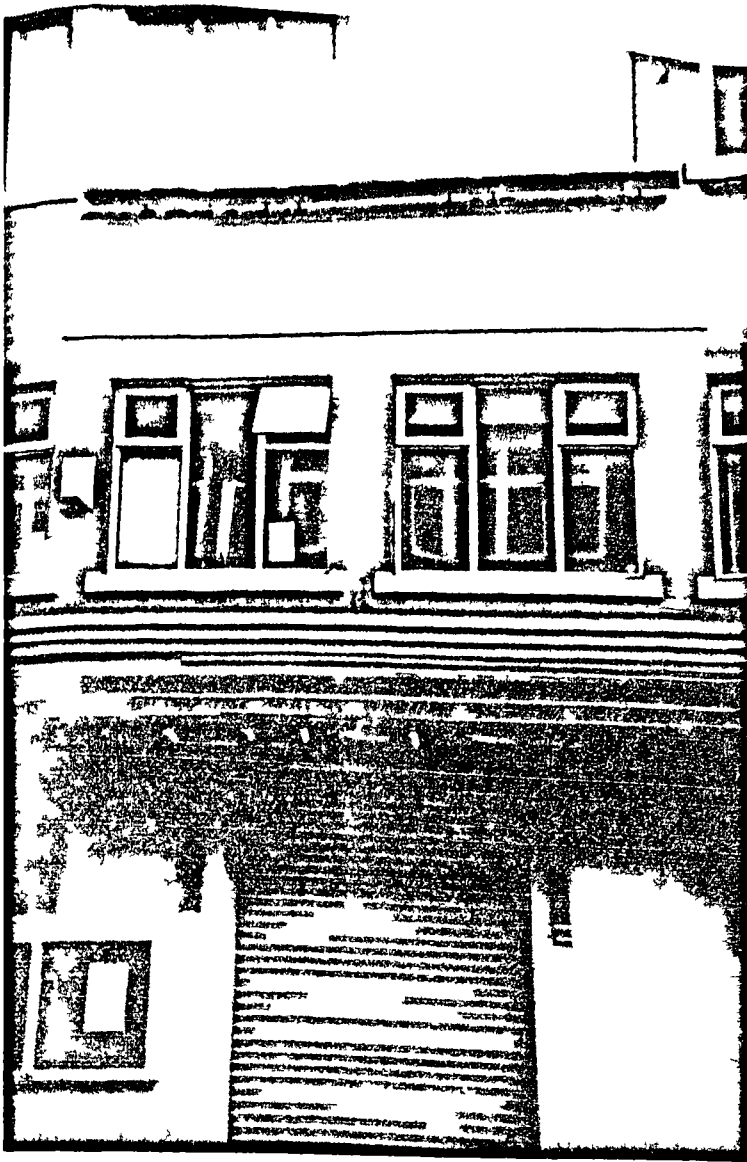
<sup>103</sup> Most football grounds are located in neighbourhoods beyond the city centre or more recently in new out of town sites.

Despite these changes to the social landscape, Tyneside's migrant communities remain constrained by a 'geography of exclusion' (Sibley, 1995). Thus, Asian communities are seldom found gathered in city centre public spaces such as the Bigg Market, football ground or central pubs. And yet a closer look reveals Hindu temples, Muslim Mosques and places of Sikh worship discretely located throughout the Northeast region<sup>104</sup>. For example there is a Jewish synagogue in the small town of Gateshead and a Hare Krishna temple along the Westgate Road in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne. Meanwhile, late Sunday morning sees Stowell Street fill with South East Asian communities drawn throughout the Northeast region who gather within 'Chinatown', at a time when many of the local white populace are at home or recuperating from the effects of the late-night before. A closer look would also reveal that the location houses the branch for the North East Chinese Association (see fig. 2.6). The public presence of ethnic minorities may appear at first glance barely visible but in actuality this presence is carefully negotiated across temporal and spatial dimensions in the region. Thus, the segregation of ethnic minority communities within discrete urban quarters encourages the region to appear superficially more white than it actually is. Of particular concern remains the way white ownership of public space has allowed racism to flourish in the area. By way of example, Bea Campbell (1993:80) refers to the former Dodds Arms in the multi-ethnic West End part of Elswick as associated with 'trouble, prostitution and skinheads'. She notes how this 'piracy of space' can liken young men to 'local imperialists' where what was once a shared space becomes a colony' (p.177). Campbell goes on to describe how visible minorities invariably have to respond to the terror of whiteness by adapting their movements in the city according to learnt notions of safety and danger:

Asian, Chinese and Vietnamese teenagers brought up in Scotswood and Elswick plan their routes as they make their way around their neighbourhoods. There are certain places and bus routes some of them boycott. They are tactical about their movement and their networks - what they do not enjoy in the place they live is freedom of movement (1993a:164).

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<sup>104</sup> The city of Newcastle upon Tyne also contains a Catholic cathedral in the city centre, in the guise of St. Mary's on Clayton Road West built in 1844.



*Fig. 2.6 The North East Chinese Association*

Similarly, in his colourful study of Newcastle drinking cultures Robert Hollands (1995:35) found that respondents still viewed the city as hostile to ethnic minorities, in part because 'the region is largely white and that Geordie culture, by its very nature, is somewhat exclusionary'. Evidence of this insular local culture finds support in Corrigan's Sunderland-based research when the London ethnographer reflects, 'In getting to know the north-east, I found a fiercely regionally partisan place' (1979:9). Coffield *et.al.* (1986:123) were also told by one local interviewee who had left for London that they 'returned to the North because "There were too many Pakis down

there". Furthermore, these statements can be backed up by the figures of the 1990 Civic Centre survey stating that 57% of black people had endured personal abuse in Tyneside.

### **Racism, Anti-Racism and Labour Histories**

In the wake of the Industrial Revolution coal, engineering, railways and shipbuilding have come to form the industrial spine of the region. While the mechanised economy of the 'Iron North' has been largely obliterated, a firm imprint of this labour history can yet be found impressed upon the cultural landscape. For example, drinking culture is especially tied to the North East industrial heritage; pubs such as The Baltic Tavern, The Free Trade, The Ship Inn and Offshore 44 testify to the working-class ancestry of shipping, trade and labour upon the River Tyne. David Bean (1971:97) has alluded to the way corner-end pubs in Tyneside have long paid homage to the industrial era, including: 'the Hydraulic Crane, the Rifle, the Gun, the Ordnance Arms, the Forge Hammer, the Crooked Billet, the Moulders Arms, the Mechanics Arms, the Shipwrights Hotel, the Vulcan, the Blast Furnace - and many, many more'. Elsewhere, Bean (1980:5) has compared the former row of drinking establishments on Scotswood Road to 'a chain of industrial oases' as a consequence of their strong links with engineering trades. For an illustration of the ties between work and culture, we need look no further than common parlance. Locals may frequently bemuse outsiders by demanding a pint of 'worky-ticket' (a bitter ale) which derives from the factory phase 'working your ticket' (altering your clocking in/out card) and also refers to larking about.

While a strong, masculine, labouring tradition can be detected in the newly developed Quayside district, the history of migrant workers and settlers is more opaque. Alongside the Arab people to have settled in South Shields from the 1860s can be found West African and West Indian seamen in North Shields. However, it is a white, male industrial legacy that is most fervently romanticised in the public house institutions along the waterfront. This supports Campbell's (1993:26) statement that most dockland developments in the 1980s occupy 'sanitised histories ... cleansed of

ethnicity ... purged of their cosmopolitan culture'. And when the residue of black migrant cultures is prominent in Bigg Market watering-holes such as The Black Boy (est.1923), known as 'Blackie Boy', these names casually hint at a nostalgic period of racial inequality (see fig. 2.7). Elsewhere, David Bean (1971:120) refers to a part of Newcastle on the City Road know as 'Little Egypt' yet this had little to do with an incoming migrant community. The name was applied on account of the extensive grain stores in the area as testified by the pub known as Egypt Cottage. However, it may surprise some to learn that Newcastle's £4.5 million Civic Centre was built from multinational materials, 'there's a lot of Italian marble, Cornish granite, Lebanese cedar, Aubusson tapestry, French walnut, rosewood from Rio, all sorts of exotic African hardwoods ... (Bean, 1980:62). This erasure of a multicultural past is, perhaps, the stigma of a region that has problematically assumed the mantle of the homogeneous 'white highlands'. However, a scratch beneath the veneer of 'Geordie' may reveal several points of resistance to the apparent, overbearing whiteness of Tyneside culture.



*Fig. 2.7 The 'Blackie Boy' pub near the Bigg Market district of Newcastle.*



### *Organic anti-racism and 'grass-roots' resistance*

It would be somewhat misleading to suggest that the North East is necessarily 'more racist' than other English districts. As we saw in the previous chapter patterns of racism are tied to internal social geographies including the differing attitudes that may exist between neighbourhood areas say, in the city or in the suburbs. In this way a large conurbation such as the West Midlands could contain zones of multi-ethnic cohabitation in which different ethnic communities happily co-exist, and outer-city enclaves in which a residual cell of hard-core white racism presides. The subcultural study of the Kempton Dene Skins is a necessary appendage to assumptions that the North contains an undisputedly stronger commitment to racism than other English areas. The intra-spatial variables identified in the West Midlands (Chapter 5) was also apparent in Tyneside. For example Alistair (10 years) lived in a multi-ethnic quarter in the West End of Newcastle upon Tyne and was willing to stick up for Asian friends he knew, considering them to be English 'Geordies' like himself:

Alistair: Where I live there's loadsa coloured people in [name of place]. Me and my brother went out and saw kids throwing stones [at an Asian home] and we said, 'Why d'ya do that?' an' they said, 'Cos *they* don't belong here'. And we said - ya kna like how some coloured people are English - we said, 'Yeah they do!' and walked off.

This expression of multi-ethnic belonging may exist in pockets of the West End where close, longstanding relationships have been forged within communities. The feeling that 'some coloured people are English' and thereby are an integrated part of the local landscape was endorsed by other school students, especially those with multi-ethnic schooling and/or neighbourhood experiences:

Lucy: People like Michael Chopper [an Anglo-Asian student], we went through school with 'em. We'd classify them as English.

Danielle: It's jus' his dad that's not.

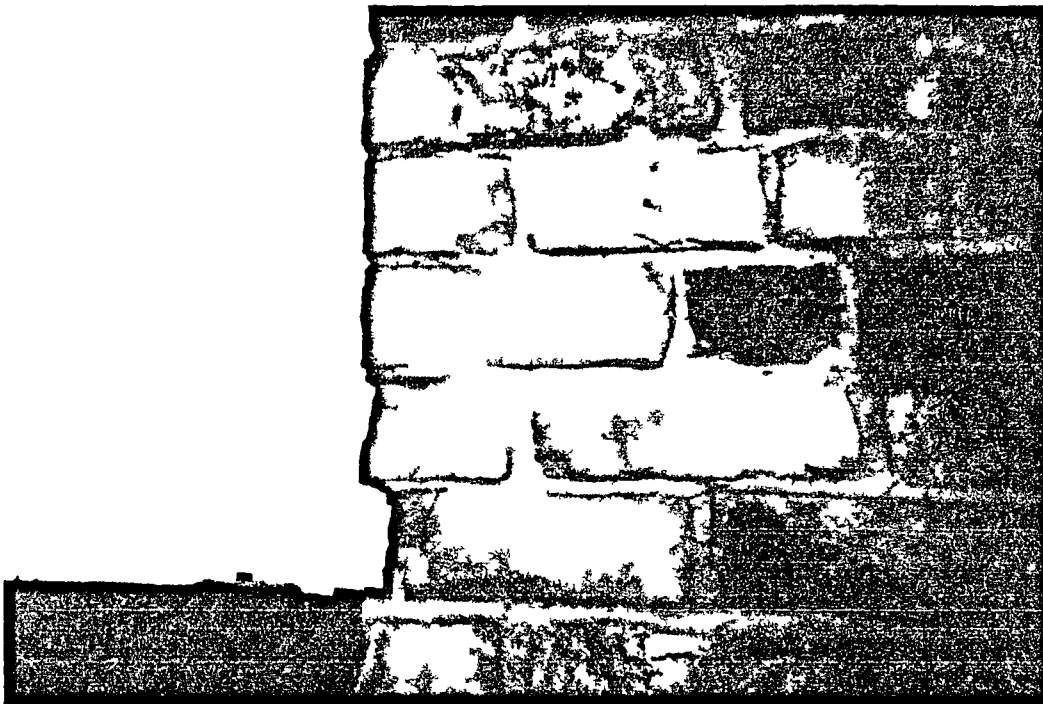
Thus, by operating with more inclusive notions of national and local identity a 'grass roots' form of anti-racism may arise as Alistair revealed<sup>105</sup>. At these moments Tyneside school students proved capable of making a qualitative distinction between skin colour and nationality. Michael 'Chopper' had an Asian father and English mother. His nickname 'Chopper' derived from an anglicised version of his surname, Shopal, and signified his complete immersion into the peer group as an 'honorary Englishman'. It could be felt that the erasure of his surname blanks out the partial Asian heritage of the student and at the same time 'whitens' his identity in the peer-group context. Even so, the inclusion of black friends within white peer groups sits uneasily with New Right theories of race and ethnicity that have come to mark British education policy at a number of levels (Rattansi, 1994; Gilroy, 1994). These New Right doctrines were to draw heavily on the ideas of Enoch Powell who continually insisted that although black people may reside in Britain as UK citizens, they do not belong here (see Barker, 1981; Gordon & Klug, 1986; Rutherford, 1997). In Eastbourne 1968, Powell coolly remarked that simply because a West Indian or Asian was born in England, he did not become an 'Englishman': 'in fact he is a West Indian or an Asian still'. Because New Right thinking conflated the cultural aspects of ethnicity with nature, biological forms of racism could give way to notions of fixed cultural difference, the 'new racism' (Barker, 1981). Thus, there was the sense that Enoch Powell was merely voicing 'common sense' opinion in proposing it was 'heresy to assert the plain fact that the English are a white nation' (1972:30). The student views listed above offer a direct rebuttal to nationalists such as Powell and indicate that black identities *can* be interwoven into both the region and a more inclusive notion of Englishness.

At the same time, in many of the all-but-white areas in Tyneside there remains evidence of the existence of residual forms of working-class racism, of a consistency that had all but died out in the West Midlands. Accordingly, the word 'paki' (and especially 'paki-shop') could be used in an unflinching manner with little awareness that it remained a widely recognised term of abuse. An older grammar of racism is

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<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless Alistair remained aware of the privilege of whiteness, remarking, 'I'd ravva be white cos you wouldn't get as much hassle in England'.

also apparent in the dialects of some young people that include such archaic terms as 'blackie', 'darkie' and 'nig-nog' (see fig. 2.8). As such, these terms do not offer a reliable gauge for comparing the degree of racism in Northern cities with that of urban districts elsewhere. Rather, they shed light on the different repertoires of racist expression that exist in British cities and the changing vocabulary of racist language. Moreover, while the overt display of racism amongst sections of working-class children remains identifiable, covert bourgeois attitudes may go undisclosed. Not least for these reasons, the illustrations of racism I have provided need to be carefully opposed, a task undertaken in Chapter 7.



*Fig. 2.8 Residual styles of racism, Tyneside, North East England.*

Although many Tyneside pubs celebrate industrial white masculinity to the exclusion of former migrant workers, there were some exceptions to this rule. The Trent House pub in Newcastle is owned and run by descendants of one of the first black families in Tyneside. This heritage continues to be signalled through the pub's traditional decor and kitsch memorabilia. The walls are studded with black, vinyl 45 rpm records produced by a number of soul, motown and reggae artists. The jukebox continues to favour black styles of music from artists such as James Brown, Aretha Franklin,

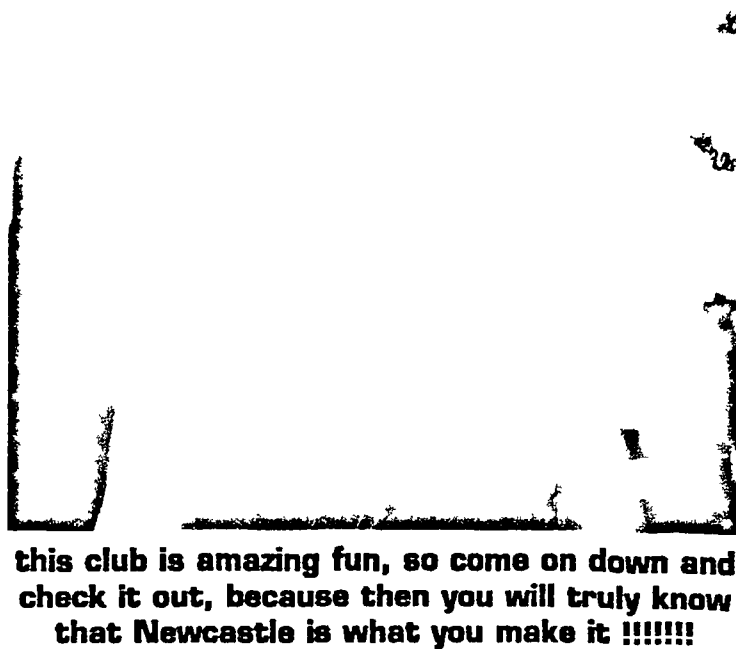


Fig. 2.9 'Uniting all communities': Fliers for World Headquarters.

Prince Buster, UB40, Public Enemy and Desmond Decker. There is an emphasis on multicultural representation in the fliers and postcards positioned strategically on the tables and by the door (see fig. 2.9). Moreover, the Leazes Lane pub is famed for its 'relaxed and hassle free atmosphere' and regarded as a space for open-minded locals (*Newcastle University Student Union Handbook*, 1996/7, p.60). The Trent is also linked to the excellent after hours club World Head Quarters (WHQ). The globally named institution continues to promote black music and remains one of the city's least aggressive night-spots, tucked away in Marlborough Crescent, near Newcastle Central Station. The student guide describes it as 'Specialising in black music' with a 'formidable reputation for quality sounds' (*Newcastle University Student Union*



Fig. 3 'Uniting all communities': Fliers for World Headquarters.

*Handbook 1996 97*, p.65). Other pubs which play black music include The Head of Steam on Neville Street, playing a fusion of jazz, funk and soul; and The Telegraph behind Central Station where resident DJs bang out drum 'n' bass. In Spring 1997 WHQ opened a new cafe bar, which it named the 'Muhammad Ali Club/Cafe' as a sign of respect to black pride. Posters of Ali (a one-time visitor to the North East) and Stephen Lawrence display a clear political sensitivity to racism<sup>106</sup>. The WHQ symbol of a multi-ethnic handshake between a black and white hand is embossed with the caption, 'UNITING ALL COMMUNITIES' (see fig. 3). This symbolic intertwining of black and white local histories on Tyneside inverts John Hall's exclusive 'Geordie Nation' portrayal of the district. The WHQ drinking club is a doubly conscious alternative to old style Working Men's Clubs and new style Bigg Market drinking. WHQ also declares that 'Geordies are black and white', in a dual reference to multicultural legacies and to the NUFC who play in the monochrome striped kit. This redefinition of local culture does not denigrate the unique labour history of Tyneside but offers other points for identification beyond the narrow confines of whiteness. An

<sup>106</sup> However, as we shall find in Chapter 7 The Trent pub can discriminate against lower working-class subcultures.



*Fig. 3.1 Mela Asian festival, Exhibition Park.*

example of the reconfiguration of the local can be found in the Newcastle Mela festival. The event has taken place in Exhibition Park, a space we previously saw to have been a site for a restricted parochial patriotism. The two-day festival is supported by NAAM (Newcastle Asian Arts & Music) and is used to promote Asian arts, music and culture within Newcastle and the Northeast. In the August bank holiday weekend of 1999 the event was reputed to have drawn 30, 000 people who partook in the music, cuisine and bazaars available on site (see fig. 3.1-3.2).

And yet where there has been racism it has also been met with local resistance. Indeed, Nigel Todd's (1995) elegant monograph on behalf of Tyne and Wear Anti-Fascist Association (TWAFa) graphically portrays the emergence of - and resistance to - Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF), the infamous 'Blackshirts'. Sir Oswald Mosley's BUF used the Bigg Market place as a space to set up rostrums and deliver propaganda about alleged Jew or Red conspiracies. The Blackshirts protected the Fascists by surrounding the speaker's platform decked out in black



*Fig. 3.2 The Bollywood Danceband, Exhibition Park.*

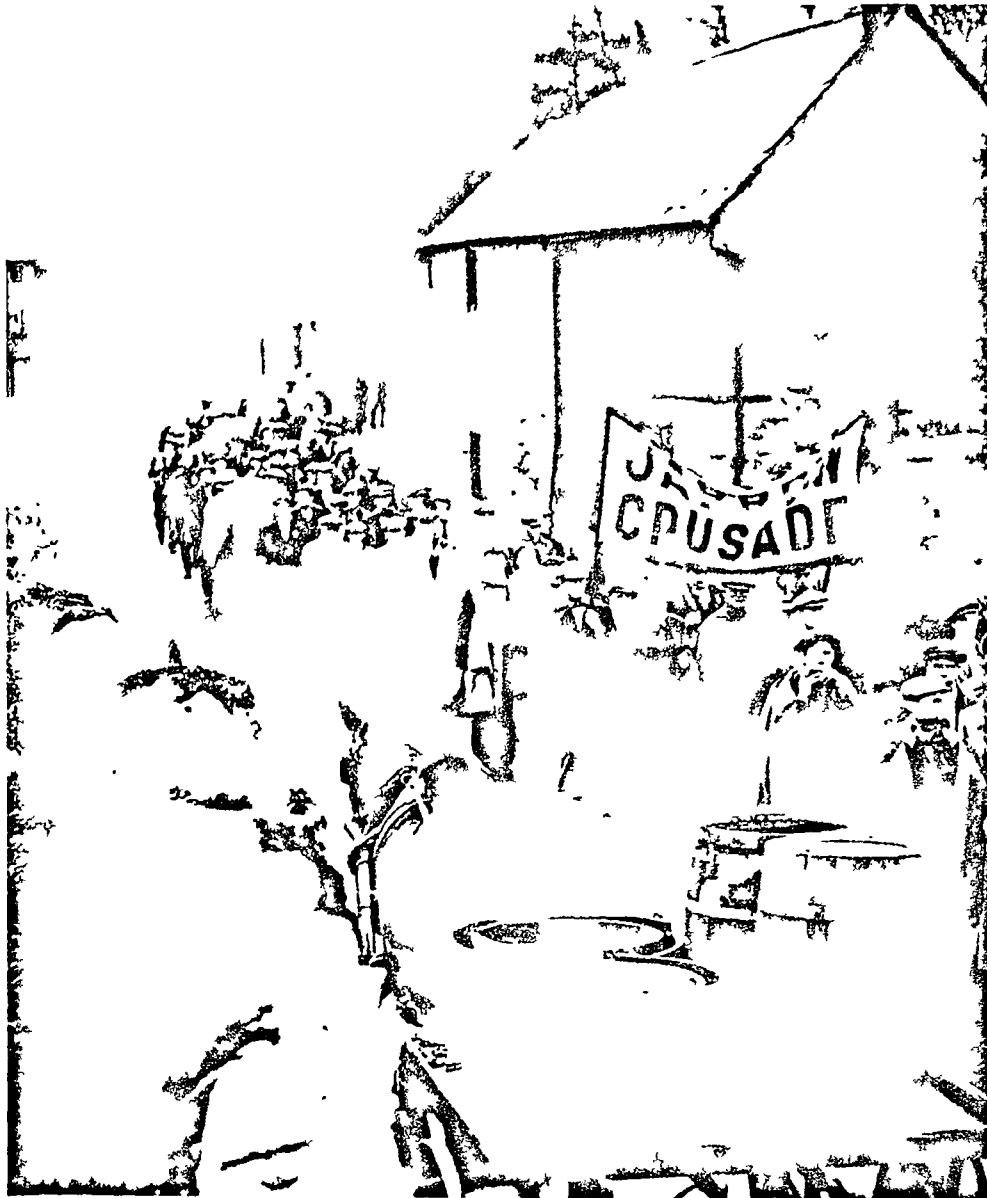
uniforms complimented by wide belts with buckles in case violence ensued. In actuality it frequently did, and it is to the credit of local communities, Tyneside Socialists and a patchwork of anti-fascist organisations that the success of the Blackshirts and the BUF were greatly restricted. Other displays of anti-racist/fascist resistance in the region were later evident in a march from Elswick Road to the Town Moor, orchestrated by Tyneside CARD (Campaign Against Racial Discrimination) in protest against Enoch Powell's inflammatory 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968.

Furthermore, the Bigg Market was also a site of labour resistance as witnessed in the Great Strike of 1926 when miners continued to remain in the area some seven months after the strike. Staunch local resistance was nowhere more apparent than in the Jarrow March of 1936, a response to the 75-80% unemployment rate the area suffered as a consequence of a most brutal capitalism. Sir Charles Palmer's shipyard and steel works had hitherto been the economic core of the community and were at the forefront of shipbuilding techniques until their closure as a result of the emergence of National Shipbuilders' Security, Ltd. The area had also seen the rise and fall of a

great coal industry in the form of Jarrow Pit and was now in danger of witnessing the collapse of the shipyard. Moreover, the Jarrow March suggested that economic disenfranchisement was as much a national issue as a local one. Thus, fellow workers from other cities kindly supplied the marchers with food and accommodation as they cheered them on their passage from Jarrow to London (fig. 3.3). The Jarrow labourers came to symbolise the precarious relations that existed between capitalists and workers nation-wide. Consequently, Tom Pickard reminds us that the marchers 'carried not only Jarrow but bits of all England with them' (Pickard, 1982:16). Unlike other 'hunger marches' the Jarrow crusade could not be dismissed as a Communist-inspired demonstration (from a population of 35,000 some 23,000 were claiming relief). This noble protest was all the more emphatic given the suggestion that British Fascists in the 1930s had been far more entrenched within the ranks of industrial proprietorship than was hitherto recognised (Pickard, 1982). The March was led by MP Ellen Wilkinson who has recorded her historic memoirs of the struggle in a moving account *The Town that was Murdered* (1939).

Such moments of organised social class and anti-fascist protest sit uneasily with recent disturbances in the region, exemplified in the 1991 riots. These parochial 'white riots' had little in common with the multi-ethnic uprisings in Britain throughout the early and mid-1980s in protest against social deprivation, racism and the brutal policing strategies deployed in black and inner-city neighbourhoods. Consequently, Bea Campbell depicts the riots as having a strange 'political emptiness' (1993:x) being 'as much *against* the community as they are *about* it' (original emphasis, p.xi). The echo of these uprisings first resounded during my first year in the city of Newcastle, notably in the Bigg Market district an area renowned for the excessive consumption of alcohol. In the football season 1995-96, NUFC held what appeared to be an unassailable lead in the Premiership. Unexpectedly they capitulated, losing many of their final games before eventually conceding the League title in their final home game of the season. On a hot afternoon *hordes* of men, women and children had gathered in NUFC shirts as a buzz of distant expectation rang through the streets. In the aftermath of the game, exuberant emotion had become translated into harsh disappointment, anger and hostility. Walking past the normally boisterous watering holes that evening, I was struck by the latent volatile atmosphere. The resentment





*Fig. 3.3 Jarrow March, 1936.*

was compounded by the news that arch rivals Sunderland FC were being promoted as Division One Champions to the Premiership. Somewhere along the line an idea emerged to descend on Newcastle Central Station to await Sunderland fans changing trains on returning from their final away fixture of the season. Police had anticipated this move and stood armed with batons and shields in ranks outside the station. The NUFC fans (here, all men) were funnelled through Pink Lane by around fifty baton-wielding policemen. Windows were smashed and stones were thrown as the police randomly charged into sections of the crowds in a concerted effort to disperse as many supporters as possible. The fans were ushered back into the Bigg Market and the district was cordoned off as rioting ensued till the early hours of the morning.

Walking through the Market the next day, shattered glass and debris lay scattered throughout and the old-fashioned public toilets in the areas were no longer topped with a roof. The scenes were to be repeated when NUFC lost in the 1998 and then 1999 FA Cup Finals<sup>107</sup>.

The Bigg Market space is named after 'biggs' an old word for barley, but has also been known as the 'Bere Market' and the 'Oate Market' (Bean 1971:70). As barley is the basis for beer, the interconnections between drinking, industry and locality can be identified. Nearby Middle Street was also said to contain fountains that flowed with free alcohol on days of public celebration<sup>108</sup>. The Bigg Market is a unique composition of pubs, clubs, restaurants, (male) public toilets, take-aways and taxi ranks, clustered together as the basis for a frenzied 'going out' community. Designed for the 'Bigg Night Out' the area is populated by a thronging mass of young people moving between pubs and commercial eateries to the pumping bass of the latest dance tunes. It was in this zone - a space where strike workers had picketed and the BUF were repelled - that this rather different brand of violence was to occur. In a narrow sense these battles mimicked the two earlier moments of protest violence in the Bigg Market: by 'the people' against the Blackshirts and by the mining strike-leaders who valiantly resisted the authority of proprietors and the strong arm of the law. In contrast to these events, the recent football violence that occurred appeared as a kind of self-mutilated form of anguish, a hollow riposte to wounded local pride. This time anger was not targeted at local political economy but concerned a dissatisfaction with consumption and the failed investments of NUFC.

## Conclusion

In this chapter on local history I have attempted to deconstruct the pervasive attitude that portrays the Northeast of England as the quintessential 'white highlands'. While

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<sup>107</sup> After the 1999 defeat 30 arrests were made related to violence and drunk and disorderly behaviour.

<sup>108</sup> David Bean (1980:35) writing about George IV's coronation remarks on the free wine flowing from the Sandhill Plant in Tyneside: 'People fought to get at the spout, and tore the clothes from each other's backs ... when the wine ran out they all rushed up to the Flesh Market Plant, which still flowed with free ale'.

there is no denying the predominance of whiteness in the region, closer inspection also uncovers diverse patterns of migration and settlement within the locality. It is suggested that by exposing these accounts more inclusive notions of 'Geordie' identity can be achieved. Furthermore, the historical analysis reveals a significant paradox. There is evidence to indicate that nationalism has taken something of a backseat in Tyneside, an outpost that appears geographically and symbolically cut-off from the English mainland. Nevertheless, the disassociation from the nation large does not go hand in hand with the relinquishing of whiteness. Instead, these identifications are often sublimated through an affirmation of local identity that hardens into a form of parochial patriotism. Moreover, 'Geordie' identity was vicariously lived out through the proud image of a white male labour force, a symbol that had lasting appeal in the region (see Chapter 8).

It was such marked investments in white regional identity that exacerbated hostilities to outsiders. In particular, the position of ethnic minority groups was especially precarious as the past and present histories of Northeast racist violence come to testify. In most cases ethnic minorities were socially excluded from representations of 'Geordie' identity and lifestyle. Indeed, the overbearing whiteness of the region had all but marginalised these groups and placed them as the hidden Other within the already dislocated periphery of the North East. At the same time there remained powerful histories of anti-oppressive action in the locality. Most notably, this could be seen in the defiant actions of miners and steelworkers as well as in 'grass-roots' anti-racism, for example the 1926 Miner's Strike, the Jarrow March, the rebuttal of fascism in the 1930s and beyond. At these points the radical tradition within working-class culture most poignantly came to the fore.

In Chapter 7 we will consider the little-known perspectives of white youth in regard to their attitudes to racism, anti-racism and white identity. It is only by taking the lead from young people whose lives are directly touched by racist and anti-racist practice that we can better think through strategies for engaging with whiteness. The chapter investigates how young people experience white, English ethnicities in the contemporary post-imperial moment. Drawing on historically-informed ethnographic data collected in the Northeast of England, the chapter explores the contingent meaning of whiteness in the predominantly white preserves of Tyneside. It aims to

explore how white ethnicities are experientially ‘lived out’ in school settings by documenting young people’s responses to anti-racist practice. The research found that while many youth agreed with the egalitarian principles of anti-racism, a majority maintained a number of white grievances they felt could be rarely verbalised. This dissatisfaction was articulated in forms of racist name-calling, where it was perceived that the existing legislation was unfair to the needs of the ethnic majority. Indeed, evidence of a ‘white backlash’ could be traced in the emotional responses of young people who believed that anti-racism and multiculturalism were effectively techniques for the surveillance of white cultural identity. Finally, the chapter points towards ways in which white, English ethnicities can be positively deconstructed by students and teachers through forms of story-telling, auto/biography and local historical research. This will mark a firm attempt to involve, rather than alienate, white youth in policies of social equity. The chapter will explore the possibilities for a productive engagement with white ethnicity through a consideration of pedagogic practices. In particular I will demonstrate how the history of racism and anti-racism on Tyneside discussed here, can be better used to refashion white, English ethnicities beyond the confines of a narrow and vituperative nationalism.

**‘White English Ethnicities’**  
**Racism, Anti-Racism and School-Student Perspectives in**  
**Tyneside**

**Chapter 7**

## Introduction: The spectre of whiteness

My involvement with radical politics on the left, had taught me to disavow the racial exclusivity of white ethnicity, but never to analyse or try and understand it ... The problem with intellectually disowning English ethnicity was that the left never got around to working out what it was, and what our own emotional connections to it were ... (Rutherford, 1997:5).

A cursory glance through the extant literature on race and education boasts a number of detailed, qualitative studies focusing on the schooling experience of ethnic minorities in multi-ethnic institutions (Fuller, 1982; Mac an Ghail, 1988; Gillborn, 1990; Sewell, 1997; Connolly, 1998). While this work has continued apace, the striking contradiction is that we appear to know far less about the racialised identities of the ethnic majority (notably English whites), and who they are in the present post-colonial era. For Jonathan Rutherford's Leftist-generation depicted above, white English ethnicity was a landscape long given over to the Right, and as such had become an unknown continent to be disowned or disavowed. The problem with expelling ethnicity in this manner, is that the projected form continues to return in other less visible guises, rather like a white phantom in serious need of an exorcism.

The failure to engage with white, English ethnicity was made acutely apparent in a poignant study of Burnage High School, Manchester, which followed the fatal stabbing of an Asian<sup>109</sup> youth, Ahmed Iqbal Ullah, by a white male, Darren Coulburn in 1986. The team-led inquiry into the reasons behind the *Murder in the Playground* (MacDonald *et.al.*, 1989), produced a comprehensive account of student race relations in what was to become known as the Burnage Report. The Report highlighted the lack of attention paid by anti-racist initiatives to the needs and perspectives of white (especially working-class) students who were treated as 'cultureless', wandering

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<sup>109</sup> In the British context the term Asian is used to refer to people from the Indian subcontinent including those of Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi descent.

spirits<sup>110</sup>. The gravity of this omission meant that ‘many of the students, especially those in the “English” category had little or no notion of their own ethnicity and were agitated and made insecure by their confusion or else showed anger and resentment ...’ (p.392). In short, the school’s attempt to disavow white, English ethnicity did not make it magically disappear altogether, instead, these emotional investments fatally returned in the guise of a racist murder. It was not the institution's anti-racist policies that were to blame, but rather the limited extent to which these initiatives touched the everyday lives of students. For these reasons, this chapter seeks to address how whiteness, Englishness and ethnicity are experienced by white youth in school-based cultures. By focusing on whiteness and Englishness in student cultures, I aim to expose the varied, ambivalent connections to race and nationhood undertaken by the dominant ethnic majority.

### *The school-based sites*

The ethnographic study is based in two schools in the Tyneside conurbation of Northeast of England. The histories of race, ethnicity and migration to the region have been discussed previously (Chapter 6). Overall, the area is regarded as a mainly-white preserve and in the last 1991 census reading the ethnic minority populace was estimated to be a little over 3%. Despite the ostensibly white appearance of the district pockets of migrant settlement can be found notably in the West End district. Thus, Emblevale School was a friendly, multi-ethnic institution of 405 students that expressed a broad commitment to anti-racist pedagogy. The school had a large intake of ‘special needs’ students, including many with visual impairments<sup>111</sup>.

Approximately three-quarters of the students were white, incorporating those from Irish, Welsh, Scottish and English backgrounds as well as a smaller number who had Scandinavian, Polish, German and Italian heritages. The remaining were mainly

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<sup>110</sup> The Report was later hijacked by sections of the press to make the spurious claim that the school's anti-racist policy led to the murder of Ahmed. This of course had been a misreading of the findings proposed by the inquiry, which had stated almost the reverse: anti-racism needed to be *extended* to incorporate white youth rather than retracted (see Rattansi 1993, for more details). To avoid further confusion I would like to state at the outset that any criticism of anti-racism made in this chapter is to be carefully placed within this caveat.

<sup>111</sup> The school had 15 students with statements of educational needs and 103 students with special educational needs without statements.

South Asian (including those of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent), with a fraction of African-Caribbean and East Asian students. In total, for 11% of school-students English was an additional language. The respondents interviewed in this establishment were between 9-12 years of age. The social class background of these students was remarkably diverse including some from leafy suburban quarters, but many from working-class districts and the impoverished areas towards the West End of the locality. Thus, about a quarter (24%) of school students were officially categorised as 'economically and socially deprived' and were entitled to free school meals on account of this.

In contrast, the all-but-white Snowhill Comprehensive was an enormous state school of 1,936 students with a massive white majority of 1,869. Interviews were conducted with Lower Sixth Form students aged 16-17 years. The Sixth Form contained 270 students of whom 255 were white, UK citizens. Of the remaining cohort 6 were Indian, 5 were classified as Chinese, 2 as Pakistani and another 2 were simply referenced as 'Other minority'. The school had 114 members of full-time staff and only one black teacher (i.e.<1%). As such the school lacked the relative ethnic diversity of Emblevale but contained students who were largely from various working-class backgrounds. Interviews were taped, transcribed and thematically organised so that I could return to key elements that had arisen from previous sessions. Field-notes were also made which included observational points and references to particular incidents.

Although a few writers have provided compelling post-structuralist analyses which begin to deconstruct the 'making' of white youthful identities in school (Sleeter, 1993; Roman, 1993; Gilborn, 1996) few have indicated how (if at all) oppressive styles of whiteness can be challenged, resisted or transformed. This chapter seeks to understand the meaning of whiteness in young people's lives by exploring how white racial identity is experientially 'lived out' in classroom contexts. Moreover, it argues for an engagement with white, English ethnicities and outlines how this task was



undertaken in Tyneside schools. The research points to the need for the development of critical projects on whiteness which may take their lead from post-structuralist accounts with an emphasis on multiple identities and deconstruction, and so move beyond what Henry Giroux (1997a:302) describes as 'the jaundiced view of Whiteness as simply a trope of domination'. Instead, I want to suggest that we need to reconceptualise what it is to be white and English in the current post-colonial period. The chapter is concerned to locate the contemporary perspectives of the ethnic majority. Here, the remarkable extent to which a 'white backlash' against anti-racism has taken place is sharply illustrated. Finally, I shall consider potential escape routes from the double-bind of empowering white working-class youth to feel confident in the knowledge of their heritages, while maintaining a student appreciation for social justice and racial inequalities.

#### *The varied usage of whiteness amongst young people*

Recent post-structuralist approaches to anti-racism have begun to challenge the fixity of black/white models of race and racism. For example, contemporary cultural theorists have indicated that racism is not something that is inherent amongst white youth as a consequence of racial privilege, but, rather, all ethnicities are 'suffused with elements of sexual and class difference and therefore fractured and criss-crossed around a number of axes and identities' (Rattansi, 1993:37). This approach has called for the need to further develop anti-oppressive models of Identity Politics that were formerly concerned with the social exclusion of minority groups and how relations of power constructed these subjectivities as subordinate. In this reading whites and blacks, for instance, are inherently located in a respective power dynamic of dominance and subordination. It is the social inequalities of racism that mark out the terrain upon which black and white actors are located. Here, power is a dangerous, determining force that benefits white citizens at the expense of oppressing their black counterparts.

This rationalist account of the effects of power, and how it is lived out, has been most thoroughly critiqued by the French analyst Michel Foucault (1980, 1988). For

Foucault, power is not uniformly experienced, nor is it a wholly negating activity. Instead, power is conceptualised as *productive* since it ‘doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no ... it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourses’ (1980:119)<sup>112</sup>. Here, power relations are continually produced and reproduced in often unpredictable ways, as the contours of oppression and resistance shift and intertwine. Rather than seeing power as a simple matter of closed binaries - white/black, men/women, straight/gay, bourgeoisie/proletariat - where the former categories come to dominate and subsume the latter elements of the dichotomous equation, post-structuralist analyses investigate the multiple interconnections between race, gender, sexuality and social class, to ask how these processes can be seen to interact, and so inflect one another. Recently, British writers have used psychoanalytical approaches to avoid overly-rational, simplistic conceptions of young people’s social power relationships, and in so doing they have pointed towards unconscious investments, unspeakable fears and desires, complex structures of feeling (Cohen, 1988; Walkerdine, 1990; Hall, 1993).

As such, the post-structuralist and psychoanalytically informed arguments have given way to refined understandings of young people’s social activities. Thus, in their landmark study of school anti-racism, the authors of the Burnage Report found they could no longer view the death of Ahmed Iqbal Ullah as simply a matter of white power (although this dynamic informed the attack). Instead, they were led to consider, ‘Did Ahmed Ullah die at the cross-roads where the power of masculinity, male dominance, violence and racism intersect?’ (1989:143). Moreover, the post-structuralist and psychoanalytical appreciation of ambivalence in the face of a deterministic rationalism, can inform us of how young people may take up racist positions at one moment (‘I hate pakis’), and then disclaim them in the next (‘But some of my best friends are black’). In this sense comprehending racism as a competing *discourse* in the lives of young people, rather than something that is intrinsic to ethnic majorities, paints a far more contradictory picture of white identities

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<sup>112</sup> At the micro-political level of schooling cultures, some researchers have utilised these notions of power to provide evidence of how teacher/student relations may incite ‘unexpected happenings’ (Kehily & Nayak, 1996, 1997; Skeggs, 1991; Walkerdine, 1990). In each of these studies, power is not a given constant, but worked and reworked through its potential possibilities, in often imaginative ways.

in educational settings. Subsequently, in their study of mainly-white Primary Schools, Troyna and Hatcher found that white children could deploy a variety of discourses when it came to discussing issues of race.

The attitudes and beliefs of white children range from those who make use of racist frameworks of interpretation to those who are committed to well-developed notions of racial equality. Many children display inconsistent and contradictory repertoires of attitudes, containing both elements of racially egalitarian ideologies and elements of racist ideologies (1992a:197).

In these readings young people's racist expressions, must be understood as 'situated responses', discursively constituted within the particular dynamic of the peer group and the institution of schooling. The issue of 'positionality' now remains central where 'a thorough "pedagogy of positionality" must entail an excavation of Whiteness in its many dimensions and complexities' (Maher & Tetreault, 1997:322).

But how can we interpret the ethnicities of white, English youth? It would appear that far from being monolithic, white cultural identities are complex, variable social phenomena. For example in his study of Rastafarians and reggae music in the Balsall Heath district of inner-city Birmingham, Simon Jones (1988) found that white youth were keen to effect the full blazonary of Rasta style through the prominent influence of black culture within their local schooling and neighbourhood networks. Evidence of cultural dialogues between black and white youth has also been found in a number of research projects conducted in South London (Hewitt, 1986; Back, 1990, 1993, 1996; Wulff, 1995). These interracial dynamics were closely related to the urban, multiracial locality and the biographical histories of young people who resided in these areas. My research implies a geographical specificity to the forms of white ethnicity enacted in Northern English towns, indeed, a qualitatively different repertoire of cultural experience may be in occurrence amongst young people in these 'peripheral' preserves.

In contrast to the cultural exchanges emphasised by some writers, other authors have drawn attention to the saliency of racism and the commitment to white ethnicity undertaken notably in working-class youth subcultures (Clarke, 1973; Pearson, 1976a; Robins & Cohen, 1978; Cohen, 1993; Nayak, 1999). Notwithstanding, Mac an Ghaill (1997) in his study of schools and colleges in the English Midlands, refers to the reactionary enactment of white ethnicity indulged in by a group of middle-class, white, male students called the 'Real Englishmen'. The parents of these young men were described as having liberal tendencies, which had initially prompted them to send their sons to non-fee paying educational establishments. Rather than taking on the liberal values of their parent-generation, however, these young men were adamant in the allegiance to a white, English masculinity. Instead, the students were struggling with issues of gender, sexuality and ethnicity, confirming the notion that white youth are responding to social change through the differing usage of ethnicity in the contemporary era:

... the Real Englishmen were in the process of constructing a positive ethnic identity. At times, their talk of nationality appeared obsessive. They explained the significance of their name with reference to white English ethnicity. More specifically, they were developing a young masculine identity against their parents' denial and suppression of English nationality and nationalism (Mac an Ghaill, 1997:84).

The parental disavowal of Englishness was very much in keeping with that of Jonathan Rutherford's Leftist-generation described earlier, yet, paradoxically, only served to encourage a celebration of national affiliations through the formation of a white peer group, 'The Real Englishmen'. The need to understand the racialised identities of the ethnic majority is also signalled in a study by Ann Phoenix (1997) of 248 young Londoners (14-18 years). She found that 92% of black youth and 77% of mixed-heritage youth claimed to be proud of their colour, while only 34% of whites shared this feeling. Meanwhile, in a discussion of British youth culture Dian Jeater (1992) claimed that the majority of young whites 'don't feel they have an "ethnicity", or if they do, that it's not one they feel too good about'. This needs to be remedied. As such, there is a paucity of detailed, qualitative research concerning why young,

white people may view their racial identities as problematic; and even less regarding the issue of what can be done about this. In support of this, I provocatively asked some older students I knew to provide me with the stereotype of a white person. The reply below illustrates the way white cultural identities can become strait-jacketed by association with extreme racism.

John (17yrs): You've got like the blonde bimbo; you've got like the skinhead. You think, 'Oh God'.

Chris (16yrs): You think like racist, Nazi kind of stuff, skinheads.

Understanding the contingency of white, English ethnicity and the multiple, fragmented forms of identity young people come to inhabit remains paramount. Indeed, Henry Giroux asks the pertinent question of, 'What subjectivities or points of identification become available to white students who can imagine white experience only as monolithic, self-contained, and deeply racist?' (1997b:310). As we have seen, a failure to engage with this issue may bolster the image of white masculinities and femininities as respectively, the 'Skinhead' or 'Blond bimbo'.

### **Classroom Cultures and Racist Name-Calling: Ethnic Majority Perspectives**

The celebratory language of multi-culturalism has tended to reproduce Asian and black British people as Other simply because it never took white English ethnicity, as problematic. Similarly white anti-racism in its disavowal of whiteness and English ethnicity ignored or denigrated white peoples' emotional attachments to their ethnicity. Neither strategy provided the space to analyse whiteness and English ethnicity and make it a subject of debate (Rutherford, 1997:163).

Schools are agencies for the production of ethnic identities via the curricula, beliefs, values and attitudes propagated. In this sense, they cannot be regarded as institutions which passively reflect or mechanically reproduce social relations of race. There already exists an extensive literature on how school authorities use racist labels to

interpret the experiences of black youth, and how teacher typologies and classroom cultures differently affect the behaviour and performance of these students (Coard, 1982; Driver, 1982; Fuller, 1982; Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Sewell, 1997). Moreover, ethnic identities are continually negotiated through student/teacher interactions, and the complex interplay that occurs within student cultures.

The assumption that schools in majority-white preserves are free from racism has been problematised in a 1987 special teacher-led issue of the journal *Perspectives* 35, which investigated 'Ethnicity and Prejudice in "White Highlands" Schools'. A cluster of academics have also demonstrated that racism is very much alive within all-white schools (Gaine, 1987, 1995; Tomlinson, 1990; Troyna & Hatcher, 1992a; Short & Carrington, 1992). Indeed, this research indicates that anti-racism may be of more import in all-but-white locales, a view supported by the Swann Committee.

Whilst most people would accept that there may be a degree of inter-racial tension between groups in schools with substantial ethnic minority populations, it might generally be felt that racist attitudes and behaviour would be less common in schools with few or no ethnic minority pupils ... we believe this is far from the case. (DES, 1985:36).

In Emblevale School where I conducted ethnographic research white students were at times critical of the existing anti-racist policy though few indicated that it should be done away with. In keeping with David Gillborn's (1996) findings it appeared that many believed racism should be challenged, yet were scathing of the current institutional structure of anti-racism that viewed them as inherently privileged. Instead, Emblevale students saw the occasional 'special' session on multiculturalism as evidence of a 'bias' towards minority pupils (see Jeffcoate, 1982). For example, during the fieldwork period an announcement was made over the school-tannoy asking all Asian students who were interested in Indian cooking to go to the school hall where a demonstration was in progress. Asian children were frequently racialised in this manner as exotically, unalterably different when it came to daily social routines. Similarly, there was an assumption that white children were only concerned

with what lay directly within 'their' cultural realm of experience. I later spoke with a teacher who mentioned having white students in her class whom were very interested in the session, and resented what they perceived to be a form of social exclusion. Thankfully, the teacher ignored the assumptions embedded in the statement (that only Asian children are interested in Indian food) and sent a mixed cohort of willing pupils.

In her own pedagogic practice Christine Sleeter (1993) found that such forms of multiculturalism all too readily failed to engage with whiteness. She recalls, 'When teachers told me about "multicultural lessons" or "multicultural bulletin boards", what they usually drew my attention to was the flat representations of people of colour that had been added; multidimensional representations of whiteness throughout the school were treated as a neutral background not requiring comment' (1993:166-177). Here, whiteness is construed as normative, the blank canvass of experience, or what Alastair Bonnett has termed, 'the Other of ethnicity' (1993b:175-176) The perception that some teachers had, was that white working-class students had no culture, yet this was in direct contrast to how young people experienced 'Geordie' identity within the locality<sup>113</sup>. Moreover, these students felt their black peers were strategically advantaged when it came to interracial conflict.

[11-12yrs]

*Anoop: Are there any advantages to being white in this school?*

Nicola: Well, no.

Michelle: Cos coloured people can call us [names].

James: It's not fair reely cos they can call us like, 'milk-bottles' and that, but us can't call them.

Sam: The thing is in this school, is like if you're racist you get expelled or something, but they [blacks] can call us names and the teachers don't tek any notice of it.

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<sup>113</sup> The term 'Geordie' derives from the mining tradition and refers to the strong, local identity of the region. 'Geordies' are renowned for occupying a distinctive working-class identity that encompasses particular dialects, linguistic phrases and other customs. For further discussion see (Colls & Lancaster, 1992). I had numerous discussions with young people in which they foregrounded the value of this local identity over and above national affiliations.

James: They tek no notice.

The school's sensitivity to racist harassment appeared to bolster white injustice among respondents, and create a feeling that such forms of 'moral' anti-racism were 'not fair' (see also MacDonald *et.al.* 1989; Hewitt, 1996). That teachers were said to ignore claims of name-calling made by black students, yet expel white students for using racist taunts, affirmed a sense of white defensiveness. These feelings may be more pronounced in multiracial locations and ethnically diverse schools. Certainly while researching in the West Midlands, white students made it clear to me that black males were often the most feared, respected and visible youth group within inner-city schools, encouraging white peers to state, 'How can they be victims?' At its most extreme, a disillusioned white student (16 years) in a large, urban, multi-ethnic school in Birmingham, responded to my question if he thought the school was racist, by claiming, 'Yeah, it is - this school's racist against its own kind!'. Where a large number of black students exist, this may not be an unusual sentiment. David Gillborn (1996) describes a similar feeling amongst white students in London provinces.

In particular, white students pinpointed a shift in power that seemed to privilege minority perspectives and deny legitimacy to whites' experiences. This issue ... arises from the multiple locations inhabited by white students as class, race, gender and sexual subjects: the assertion that whiteness ultimately defines them as powerful oppressors simply does not accord with the lived experience of many working-class white students (1996:170).

However, even in the white locales of the North East some youth maintained that black students were given preferential treatment deemed 'unfair'. Furthermore, it was said that they could even exploit this situation when it came to name-calling. Below, young people signalled the emergence of what they perceived to be an 'anti-white' vocabulary of abuse:



*Anoop: So what do the name-callers say?*

Michelle: Things like 'milk-bottle'.

James: And 'whitey'.

Michelle: And 'milky way' and things.

Alongside the opinion that anti-racism was 'unfair' to the needs of white youth, ran an overwhelming feeling that black students had an identifiable culture that they could draw on which was denied to English whites. Moreover, the positive expression of black ethnicities could be experienced by sceptical white youth as a broader exclusionary device.

Sam: What I don't like is all the Pakistani people all talk in their language an' you dunno what they're talkin' about. Used to be this lad in our class, Shaheed, he would talk to his mate Abdul, half in English, half in another language.

Nicola: If they wanna talk about you they can talk in another language.

Michelle: If we wanna talk about them, they know what we're sayin'.

Again, the implications are that it is white youth whom are culturally impaired in exchanges with their black counterparts. This is a reversal of older academic assumptions that it is black students who are compromised, 'caught between two cultures'. Instead, white youth in Emblevale were keen to emphasise the advantages of being bilingual ('they know what we're sayin') and the classroom benefits of being construed as the potential victims of racist harassment. Troyna and Hatcher (1992a) also found that positive assertions of black identity were frequently viewed by white children as an attempt at dominance. However, the choice for minority students within the predominantly white conurbation of Tyneside appeared to be 'act white' or return to the West End urban interior.

Emblevale students were keen to make a careful distinction between racism as a discourse of power available to them through regimes of representation (in language, speech, metaphors and imagery); and racism as a 'chosen' subject position that was explicitly ideological and practised in daily, vehement exchanges. Whereas the former stance offered a latent potential for racist enactment, triggered only at certain moments; the latter position was more readily condemned as explicitly racist and wholly unegalitarian. It is this 'unevenness' of racism in young people's lives that we need to be attentive to. The grainy line separating what white students said to their black peers in certain situations, and how they felt towards them more generally, became a source of tension when episodes of racism surfaced in classroom contexts. Most specifically in fraught, personal exchanges between students, racist name-calling offered an inviting mode of redress for whites.

Sam: We canna sey anythin' cos they [black students] can get us annoyed and it's hard not calling them a racist name or somethin'. I never bin racist cos I don't think it's right but some people jus' think it's hard to not call them a racist name if an argument starts.

The student responses listed here, signal a confusion regarding the issue of why white racial epithets such as 'whitey', 'milk-bottle' or 'milky way' are not construed as forms of racist name-calling. As other researchers have implied the meanings carried in white, derogatory terms rarely carry the same weight as anti-black racist terminology (Back, 1990; Troyna & Hatcher, 1992a). Troyna and Hatcher (1992a; 1992b) argue that racial insults such as 'white duck' or 'ice-cream' must be carefully distinguished from terms such as 'paki', which are saturated with racist power.

Black children wanting to call racial names back faced several problems. First, the white racist vocabulary was much richer, as many children recognised ... Second, white children knew that there was no social sanction against white skin ... The third problem concerns the issue of 'nation'. There was no reverse equivalent to the racist name-calling of "Paki" ...' (1992a:158).

In Troyna and Hatcher's (1992a; 1992b) definition, it is precisely because black and white students occupy different discursive positions of dominance and subordination in race relations, that white epithets are considered 'racial' name-calling forms and black epithets are viewed as 'racist' name-calling terms. Here, there is no equivalence between black and white name-calling as ultimately 'Racist attacks (by whites on blacks) are part of a coherent ideology of oppression which is not true when blacks attack whites, or indeed, when there is conflict between members of different ethnic minority groups' (1992b:495). However, this anti-oppressive model reifies race, and may have less import at a global level where it is subject to alternative forms of racism and differing relations of power. A further concern remains with how identity is deterministically conceptualised in this paradigm, since 'Within an anti-oppressive problematic, an individual's subjectivity is conceptualised as coherent and rationally fixed' (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 1997:24).

Because of the striking manner in which young children in Emblevale perceived racism and anti-racism, I was curious as to how older students, who had a life-time of schooling experience under Conservative leadership, would respond. Snowhill Comprehensive was an enormous, all-but-white school in Tyneside. The Lower Sixth students I interviewed indicated that the predominance of white students was beneficial to the extent that inter-ethnic struggles were avoided. Blaming black people rather than white antagonism was a common discursive mode of analysis (Gilroy, 1995). There was a sense that if the school merged with a mixed, local establishment black students would compartmentalise into ethnic groups; there was no recognition that ethnic majorities were themselves engaged in forms of 'white bonding'. Moreover, many working-class students felt that black students were as culpable, if not more so, than whites when it came to racism.

[16-17yrs]

*Anoop: Do you think that blacks can be as racist as whites?*

Lucy: I think it works both ways.

Chris: More, I would say.

*Anoop: More racist?*

Chris: Er, they're like bitter against the way they've been treated like slavery and that. They feel like somehow they've been hard done by.

Lucy: It works both ways.

The idea that blacks are 'bitter' against whites and feel 'hard done by', draws on a familiar schema which portrays ethnic minority groups as having a 'chip on the shoulder'. As with younger Emblevale students, there was a belief that racism 'works both ways', it is something that blacks and whites commit alike. Chris, who we heard from above, went on to describe the 'reverse racism' he perceived in multiracial districts.

Chris: There's a lot of racism but it's like different, it's from the blacks against the whites, you know what I mean? Me dad went into a bar y'kna in Leicester [a multi-ethnic city in the English Midlands] and it was like blacks everywhere. And he went in and it was like, 'Oh white boy' and all this.

*Anoop: What kinda things were being said?*

Chris: Jus like, y'kna how some fools may call 'em 'Niggers' and stuff? It was like, 'You white honky', and all this kinda crap, mon. It was like 'What you doing here' and all this, 'Get back to where you come from'. [...] And now that it is more equal, like the equal rights and stuff, they want to get their own back on whites.

The geographical location of Leicester and Tyneside is strikingly different, which in turn has a bearing on race relations in these provinces (Bonnett, 1993c). Since many Tyneside students operated with a parallel model of racism which equated the term 'black nigger' with that of 'white honky', their cynicism towards anti-racism became clearer to understand. However, other white, working-class students refuted the parallel model of racism and emphasised the privileged position of whiteness in name-calling interactions. Here, Ema (16 years) elucidates on the difference between terms such as 'black bastard' and 'white trash'.

Ema: If I was arguing with a coloured person and I said something that wasn't needed to be said and they said it to me and went into [the Deputy Head's] office and I said, 'I called him a black whatever' and said, 'but he called me "white trash"', he'd think, 'How's that gonna harm you?'

I may have been called a name like that but it wouldn't bother me. [...]

If someone come to me and says, 'She just called me a black b', I'd say something and get 'em done, if I was a teacher. But if someone says, 'She's just called me "white trash"', I'd say, 'And what's wrong with that?'

I'd probably think, 'Well maybe it would hurt them, but to me it wouldn't be anything to say "white"'. I'd be proud of it.

Ema makes a qualitative distinction between the use of a black or white racial epithet before an insult. She indicates that white has a neutral, or even positive signification that cannot be easily overturned ('I'd be proud of it'). As Troyna and Hatcher (1992b) would have it, the prefix 'white' does not draw on an historical, 'coherent ideology of racism' (slavery, imperialism, apartheid, discrimination, xenophobia, nationalism) in the ways that a term 'black bastard' might. For as Peter Jackson has emphasised, 'concepts of "whiteness" should continue to be theorised within a racialised context, whereby some identities are privileged over others, providing the basis for powerful forms of racialised exclusion' (1998:104).

Although awareness to the qualitatively different racialised experiences of black and white youth remains pertinent, contemporary definitions of racism have been further extended. While Troyna and Hatcher's definition foregrounds the 'asymmetrical power relations' (1992b:495) between blacks and whites and is a welcome improvement on liberal, power-evasive models of racism, there remain potential short-comings with the anti-oppressive framework. To begin with, there is an immediate reification of race as an insurmountable point of difference that too readily equates whiteness with oppression and blackness with victimhood. Moreover, whites are endowed with the privilege of being the central architects of history, and the key agents of social change. The multiple positions that blacks and whites may come to

occupy, and how these subjective locations are nuanced by class, gender, sexuality and generation, are subsequently condensed into a racial dichotomy of power/powerless. Furthermore, the tendency to construe racism across a black/white binary, may in turn occlude other examples of racist hostility such as anti-Semitism; the 'ethnic cleansing' of Eastern European Bosnians; the ritual persecution of the Irish. Indeed, an engagement with whiteness beyond racial polarities may allude to a complex understanding of racism that may invoke aspects of nationhood or religion as further points of discrimination.

Recently, other writers have argued for anti-racist approaches that move beyond black/white racial binaries of power. Connolly (1998:10) for example has remarked how, 'We cannot assume that racism will always be associated with beliefs about racial inferiority; that it will always be signified by skin colour; that it will be only White people who can be racist; or that racism will always be the most significant factor in the experience of minority ethnic groups'. As such, the exercise of power is subject to context and situation, and can come to mean different things at different moments. David Gillborn (1996) extends this differentialist reading of racism to incorporate black students as potential aggressors.

Hence, while black and Asian people - as a group - can be said to be *relatively* powerless in Britain, in certain situations black and Asian individuals clearly exercise power; therefore, they have the potential to act in ways that are racist. This would apply to the school situation, for example, where black and Asian students may enjoy power through peer relations (1996:170).

In the two schools I visited, the overwhelming whiteness of the Tyneside conurbation (Bonnett, 1993c) meant that black and Asian students rarely shared the peer-group power that some black youth may enact in multi-ethnic inner-city locales. However, while conducting research with perpetrators of racist violence in Birmingham, England, we found evidence of involvement by mixed-heritage youth (with African-

Caribbean fathers and English mothers) against Asian peoples<sup>114</sup>. Similarly, Phil Cohen (1988) has written persuasively about ethnic alliances between white working-class youth and African-Caribbean young people, against Asian communities in urban Britain. These examples point to a move away from binary relations of racism (black/white) towards composite forms of discrimination; we may consider this shift in the emergence of a concept of *racisms*<sup>115</sup>. Here, established types of racism may continue but they have also fragmented and multiplied into new, sometimes contradictory expressions of hostility (Cohen, 1988; Rattansi, 1993; Back, 1996; Gillborn, 1997).

This points towards a need for anti-racist practitioners in majority-white schools to engage with the salience of whiteness or otherwise, in young people's cultures and discuss the social meaning of these terms with students. A failure to encompass the perspectives of white students only serves to encourage confusion, and the claims of unfairness we have witnessed. Notably, many of the students who voiced these grievances did not identify as racist, nor were they vehemently opposed to anti-oppressive school policies. Their points of resistance had less to do with a rejection of anti-racism as a democratic strategy, rather they appeared more concerned with perceptions of being 'left out'. Thus 'special' multicultural sessions designed for minority students in dance, art or cookery had a tendency to suture white defensiveness (Roman, 1993). Similarly, the bilingual skills of some students were frowned upon as a conscious attempt at white exclusion. These feelings were further compounded by a belief that school rules on name-calling indirectly 'favoured' minority students over ethnic majorities.

As the Burnage Report (1989) signalled, young people need clear guidelines about discriminatory practices, but these policies must be formed more closely with all

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<sup>114</sup> The research into the Social Basis of Racist Action Amongst Young People in Outer-City Areas was funded by the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC 000234272) and conducted with Les Back and Roger Hewitt, with the aid of Ian Barker.

<sup>115</sup> For a thorough account of definitions of racism and how it is variously practiced see (Miles, 1995).

students whose lives are directly touched by these actions<sup>116</sup>. This would indicate a need for interventionist strategies that are more sensitive to the varied cultures of young people. Tyneside responses appeared to indicate that many white students were inconsistent in their use of racist language; certain youth may be regularly targeted while others were not; context, situation and circumstance all appeared to affect the emergence of a racist vocabulary in young people's social interactions. This does not detract from the pernicious aspects of racism but provides careful insight into the problems of imposing an insensitive and proscriptive anti-racist policy. However, as we shall now see, white students were themselves highly ambivalent about the value of anti-racist practice in school institutions. While initial interviews appear to suggest that students hold egalitarian values when it comes to issues of race and ethnicity, more penetrative, long-term ethnographic investigation revealed that there a number of 'unspoken' white grievances could simultaneously be harboured beneath the surface.

### *White Backlash*

The anti-racist backlash (anti-anti-racism) in Britain was most viciously pursued in tabloid newspapers in the late eighties and early nineties during the pomp of New Right ideology. Somewhat surprisingly, vivid traces of these events were recalled in much detail by a generation that would have been toddlers at the time of these affairs. The students in Emblevale had a skewed interpretation of these incidents, no doubt drawn from older members in the white community, who saw the incriminating representation of these events as evidence of the curtailing of white ethnicity. Significantly the provocative tabloid headlines had been developed as an attack on English Southern Left-wing councils, including Brent, Haringey and the Inner-London Education Authority (ILEA). The phobic attack on an imagined anti-racist 'Political Correctness' (PC) has been widely documented by other writers in the area (see for example, Barker 1981; Gordon & Klug, 1986; Epstein, 1993). Ali Rattansi (1993:13) succinctly sums up the Right-wing hysteria of the period as a series of

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<sup>116</sup> These rules may be of use in out-of-school situations too. For example, in his youth club research Les Back found that the proscriptive anti-racist policies available 'took no account of the lived cultures of the young people who were subject to these rules' (1990:15).



‘moral panics ... orchestrated around “loony-left councils” supposedly banning black dustbin liners, insisting on renaming black coffee “coffee without milk”, and banning “Ba-ba black sheep” from the classroom - scares which turned out to rest on complete fabrications (Media Research Group, 1987)’. However, while many of the events were taken out of context, exaggerated, or simply invented this did not seem to detract from a ‘common-sense’ understanding of anti-racism and multiculturalism as an attack on white cultural practices.

Nicola: I’ve got this book from when I was little, it’s called *Little Black Sambo*. It’s got Black Mumbo and Black [giggles] Jumbo.

Sam: Oh, I had that, I used to ‘ave that’.

Michelle: It’s been banned. You’re not allowed to say, ‘Baa Baa Blacksheep’ [a nursery rhyme].

Nicola: And you’re not allowed to ask for a black coffee.

Michelle: Aye.

Anoop: *Who says?*

Michelle: On the news.

Sam: So we go round singin’, ‘Baa Baa Multicoloured Sheep!’

I was surprised to find that despite the young age of the children and their particular geographic situation, this did not detract from them having an intimate knowledge of media representations of anti-racism. What remains pertinent, is that the debates appear to have left a deep scar on the psyche of white, working-class subjects to date, in economic outposts as far removed from the English capital as the North East<sup>117</sup>.

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<sup>117</sup> According to Alastair Bonnett (1993c) anti-racist practitioners on Tyneside are permanently wary of a backlash so opt for a ‘softly-softly’ or ‘gentle’ approach to anti-racism, favouring concern with ‘local sensitivity’. This feeling, however constraining it may be, is not overly paranoid. Some three years after the Right-wing media ‘bashing’ of London city councils, local papers carried the headline ‘Baa Baa Pinksheep’ as the lead for one of their stories.

The notion of whites as under-surveillance, where literature is 'banned', and seemingly innocent tasks such as ordering a coffee are open to an imagined scrutiny, was taken a step further. It was even thought that legislation existed which censored white behaviour.

Nicola: And there's these dolls that you're not allowed to 'ave.

Sam: Gollywogs.

Nicola: Aye. And on the news now [it says] every child has gotta have a black doll.

*Anoop: Hold on, are you saying that every child by law has got to have a black doll?*

Nicola: Yeah, so they grow to accept black people.

San: Y'kna how they've started making black Sindy's and that, and Barbies? [female dolls]

James: And black Action Man [male doll].

Michelle: Aye, black Action Man!

The language used in student descriptions of anti-racist practice suggests they interpret it as a largely proscriptive, often negative set of values. Students continually refer to items that have been 'banned', symbols that you have 'gotta have' and things you are 'not allowed' to say or do. In essence, anti-racism and multiculturalism are reproduced as part of a 'discourse of derision' (Ball, 1990) within the social peer groups of white youth. The feeling among these students was that white ethnicity had to be regulated and that anti-racism was a somewhat arbitrary mode of 'policing'. At best anti-racism was random and nit-picking in its choice of execution (black dolls, gollywogs, coffee, nursery rhymes, dustbin liners etc); at worst it was downright 'unfair', and even prejudice against whites.

James: They don't go on about 'Baa Baa Whitesheep'.

Nicola: That's even more racist.

James: Them [blacks] could be banned for buyin' white milk.

Michelle: [*laughing*] Well ya can't buy black milk!

White students appeared acutely sensitive to any semblance of preferential treatment, and at times saw the school's anti-racist policy as a form of institutional discrimination against themselves. Roger Hewitt (1996:57) discusses perceived 'unfairness' by white youth as a major obstacle for anti-racism as it functions as 'a screen which filters out the possibility of some whites fully understanding the meaning of racial harassment, and generates an almost impermeable defensiveness'. In the context of the Tyneside conurbation, a more meaningful approach may be to ally the experience of working-class students with the local culture<sup>118</sup>, to include discussions on 'Geordie' identity for example, or the precarious position 'Englishness' holds within the region. Understanding the different types of anti-racism required in various locales remains of key significance. Specifically, Bonnett (1993a, 1993c) has argued for the recognition of spatial complexities, because forms of anti-racist practice which may be successful in London cannot be surgically transplanted into Tyneside where the ethnic composition is sharply different. Indeed, the 'radical' practitioners he interviewed advocate a response that engages with the interstices of race and class, and have a contextual meaning of the local populace.

The geographical specificity of the North East was apparent when students spoke of the attitudes of black friends they knew who lived in the region. It was frequently alleged that these youth chose to symbolically 'shed their skins' and identify with the extremities of whiteness. Here, ethnic minority students could themselves engage in a personalised backlash against blackness in the context of living in a mainly-white area. Thus, a teacher at Emblevale informed me of a black student in her class who used derogatory racist language to impress his white peer group. Another young woman reported knowing an Asian youth in an outlying Northeast town whom had assumed the symbols of Nazi-regalia. Other students also spoke of individuals who

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<sup>118</sup> See for example the practical approaches adopted by Brown *et.al.* (1995) in predominantly white schools in Cumbria.

evoked racism to consciously 'whiten' their identities. Such tales were particularly prevalent in the all-but-white establishment of Snowhill Comprehensive:

John (17 years): Like in this school where there's only like a couple of blacks and all whites, well shallow people like Balbir Singh he was like racist against blacks cos he'd been with whites all his life.

*Anoop: What do you mean by that?*

John: Well if he saw a black person, like if he was arguing with someone who was black, he'd just shout abuse saying all this racist stuff to them.  
[...]

Jolene (16 years): Yeah, he'd shout all this racist stuff to them [i.e. black youth].

Chris (17 years): Even though he was the same colour. He probably felt that he was white.

Jolene (16 years): He'd say, 'Go back to where you come from!' and all that.

*Anoop: He thought he was white?*

*Chris (17 years): Yeah.*

The phenomenon of black people who self-identify as 'white' is best exemplified by Frantz Fanon (1970[1952]) through a complex, psychic interaction he terms *Black Skin/White Masks* - the title of his ground-breaking analysis. The Martinique writer describes his personal ambivalence to whiteness: 'as I begin to recognise that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognise that I am a Negro ... I have unthinkingly conceded that the black man is the colour of evil' (p.140). By constructing a 'white mask' of racist intolerance, it is possible that students like Balbir Singh are able to temporally relinquish the 'colour of evil' and attach themselves to a belief that they 'feel' white. This situation could be made all the more acute in view of the social geography of the region. As Chris continued, 'His mind might have been thinking that, cos he'd been in such a white community all his life'. These issues of spatiality were also prevalent in the West Midlands conurbation where Calvin and Leonard drew upon a racist discourse of whiteness whilst residing in the white enclave of the Kempton Dene. Later on in the thesis we will go on to explore the complex ways in which young people may disavow one form of ethnicity

in preference to the take up of another (Chapter 9, 10). As such, the cultural identities pursued by young people have a fluid quality and can be said to represent complex, contingent moments of identification that are subject to transformation.

*Addressing whiteness: Strategies for engaging white ethnicities*

We still have a great deal of work to do to *decouple* ethnicity as it functions in the dominant discourse, from its equivalence with nationalism, imperialism, racism and the state, which are the points of attachment around which a distinctive British or, more accurately, English ethnicity have been constructed (Hall, 1993:257).

According to David Gillborn (1995:11) schools now require 'a more sensitive and sophisticated approach to questions of *white* ethnicity'. But the question that now remains is how can we delicately capture the varied experience of white ethnicity without alienating white youth? This is all the harder to address, as whiteness and Englishness have come to represent the ethnicity that is not one. As Stuart Hall has noted, 'the embattled, hegemonic conception of 'Englishness' ... because it is hegemonic, does not represent itself as an ethnicity at all (1993:257). Furthermore, as the Burnage Report illustrated, 'heavy-handed' forms of anti-racism have tended to treat white students as implicitly racist on the basis of their whiteness, 'whether they are ferret-eyed fascists or committed anti-racists' (1989:402). In order to sensitively engage with white, English ethnicities I shall turn to historical methods.

Exposing the diverse histories of white students upon Tyneside could be a productive exchange where the immediate heritage of respondents was discussed (see Chapter 6). The recognition that 'English' identities had changed over time allowed these students to feel less threatened by the prospect of black British settlement. Instead, projects directed by young people which draw on familial life-history accounts may be of use to anti-racist practitioners, whom may wish to share their own personal biographies. Encouraging students in mainly white preserves to sensitively trace their ethnic and

social-class lineage was found to be a fruitful way of deconstructing whiteness<sup>119</sup>. Even so, I remain in agreement with David Gillborn (1995:89) that, firstly, 'no strategy is likely to be completely successful, and second, that an effective strategy in one context, may fail in another context or at another time'. With these provisos in place, the approach deployed was sensitive to the local culture of the community and subject to my particular relationship with students. I found that imploding white ethnicities offered a way of contextualising anti-racism, and helped to develop an interest amongst students in race relations they felt they could have a personal stake in. Such a pedagogy is imperative for as Stuart Hall has noted, 'We are all, in that sense, *ethnically* located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are' (1993:258).

The value of student life histories were made known to me when new inflections upon an assumed, coherent English ethnicity began to unfold. Although a number of students identified as white-English<sup>120</sup> in general parlance, their subjective deconstructions acted as fertile ground upon which to yield syncretic youth identities.

Danielle: Mine parents were born in Germany, cos me nanna used to travel o'er abroad.

Brett: I used to have an Italian granddad.

Alan: Me next name's O'Maley an' that isn't English.

[...]

Nicola: I tell yer I'm English, but I'm part German. My granddad came over as a prisoner of war, he was working over at Belsey Park and my grandma was teaching.

[...]

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<sup>119</sup> In US Higher Educational establishments, Kristin Crosland Nebeker found that such 'counter-stories' can 'question the role of whites in the dialogical process'. For further examples of biographical and story-telling critiques of whiteness see also (Ware, 1993; hooks, 1993; Nayak, 1997).

<sup>120</sup> This would support the use of long-term ethnographic research where the researcher can gradually get to know respondents, over 'cold' interviewing methods. It may also be of use to speak to young people both in groups and individually to grasp the various situations in which multiple ethnic identifications can arise.

James: Some white people have got black people in their family. Like say my aunty married a black person and had babies.

Michelle: I've got one in my family.

[...]

Sam: I'm a quarter Irish, a quarter Scottish, a quarter English and a quarter Italian.

The responses generated during the fieldwork period indicated that the implosion of white ethnicities could offer alternative historical trajectories that many students had a self-fascination with. Tracing their familial past was a means of personalising history, making it relevant to their life experiences to date. In the course of this process it was not unusual for students to refer to generational elements of racism within their family lineage. Many students mentioned parents or grandparents with pronounced racist opinions, this allowed for further points of critique and discussion between young people. This would support Robert Burgess's claim that, 'historical sources can provide the field researcher with a rich vein of material to compliment the ethnographic present and provide deeper sociological insights into the way in which people lived their lives' (1982:134). Although many whites may lay claim to the identity of white-Englishness, the narratives illustrated how these ethnicities were discursively constituted in the present situation. According to Hickman and Walter (1995) it is this failure to deconstruct whiteness that has led to the invisibility of Irish ethnicities in contemporary Britain. The deconstruction of white identity became, then, a means of splicing Englishness, whiteness and ethnicity.

Although the fragmented, 'hyphenated' identities of white youth (Anglo-Irish, Scotch-Irish, Anglo-Italian) has particular resonance to the local culture of the North East, this did not mean that Englishness itself was left untouched. Alan (10 years) pointed to the hybrid history of English identity and its absence from contemporary debate when he remarked, 'It's all a mixed breed [sic.] in England cos we've had the Vikings and the Saxons come across ... France, Denmark, them places'. In turn I could further share knowledge of the locality by discussing the longstanding migrant settlement in the region and the resistance to fascism during the interim war period and beyond.

Conversations concerning the locality and the labouring heritage of the area were particularly productive. Moreover, with older students it was possible to engage in a critical dialogue with whiteness. Ema and Jolene (both 16 years) each identified as working-class young women. Ema's father was in the army and during the fieldwork period she too decided to sign-up in preference to completing her Sixth Form education. Jolene's father, meanwhile, had a masculine occupation that reflected the depleting infrastructure of the region, working as a bailiff. Both Ema and Jolene engaged in an appraisal of their own racial identities, which at times disrupted the association of Britishness/Englishness with whiteness.

Jolene: There's different colours of white.

*Anoop: What d'you mean?*

Jolene: Like Chinese. Do you know what I mean, what colour are they? There isn't a colour - we're not proper white.

Ema: Different shades really.

Jolene: There's Chinese; there's other people; there's us; naturally dark skins who are white.

Ema: People say like, 'I'd hate to be black' and everything but when they go on the sun-bed and get tanned, they love to be tanned.

Jolene: Yeah! People go on the sun-bed just to get browned.

The critical deconstruction of whiteness undertaken by Ema and Jolene fractures monolithic notions of white identity through a recognition that so called 'whites' are comprised of 'different shades really'. Instead of seeing white as colourless, as it is all too frequently regarded (Dyer, 1993; 1997), the young women introduced a wide spectrum of colour symbols which at its most extreme included bronzed, sun-tanned figures who still manage to 'claim' the elusive emblem of whiteness. The question of



what colour Chinese people are, further disrupts the fixed polarisation of race as a discourse shared solely between black and white citizens<sup>121</sup> (Bonnett, 1997)

Moreover, whiteness is seen as a term socially ascribed to certain groups rather than an accurate mode of racial classification. The social construction of whiteness is also apparent here, where students recognise that strictly speaking they were not 'proper white' (whatever that might be). On further questioning Ema also made a point of stating that many black people were British. She went on to use the metaphor of a party to explain the way in which migrant groups had been invited to the country during the process of post-war reconstruction and then subsequently discriminated against. 'It's like getting all the coloured people to make all the food and preparations for a party', she explained, 'and then just before the party saying, "No, you're not invited"'. Such responses reveal the acute sensitivity young people felt towards issues of 'fairness' and social justice. Without being over-rationalistic this implies that a new critical pedagogy of 'fair play' could productively be used in certain classroom situations.

At present, it seems highly inappropriate to create a sense of 'white pride' amongst young people especially when the enactment of such an identity, however implicit it may be, invariably relies upon the Othering of different nations and a consolidation of the symbols of racism and nationalism. But this does not mean that more meaningful interpretations of whiteness cannot be fashioned. Overall, nesting anti-racism within the *localised* cultures of young people in the North East permitted a discussion of 'Geordie' identity, whiteness and Englishness to come about, and as such offered a broader strategy of participation. Experimental artists such as the Multiple Occupancies Collective whose work was recently discussed in a recent edition of the journal *New Formations* have used song, poetry and the medium of painting to recount the multiple configurations which come to make up their new ethnicities in Britain. The notion of white youth as also inhabiting 'multiple occupancies' may

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<sup>121</sup> Frank Dikotter (1992) has provided detailed historical evidence of ancient landed-gentry Chinese people who frequently deployed the symbol of whiteness as a signifier of bodily beauty. Thus, skin, teeth and other anatomical parts were compared to 'white jade', 'tree grubs', 'melon seeds', 'congealed ointment', 'silkworm moths' or 'young white grass' (p.10). However, the author also makes clear that the notion of a 'yellow race' came via missionaries but was taken up willingly by sections of the Chinese who equated the colour with the positive signification of the golden sun and fertile soil.

enable them to feel included in the term 'ethnicity', without having to resort to an unflinching nationalist rhetoric. Jane Ifekwunigwe, a co-member of the Collective, claims to 'encourage others with multiple identifications to acknowledge rather than to deny these affiliations' (1998:95). This call is taken up in Lorraine Ayensu's poems where autobiographies of the local are a central part of the work. She explains:

I was conceived as a result of my White English birth-mother's extramarital relationship with my Black Ghanaian father. She was married to a White English man ... My ethnic and cultural identities are strongly rooted in White Geordie (native Tyneside) culture. Embracing my Geordie experiences involves both a racialised critique of my ironic circumstances and an affirmation of my origins and my complex realities (pp.96-97).

Ayensu's knowing attempt to embrace a Tyneside identity acts at once as a 'racialised critique' of the whiteness of 'Geordie'. At the same time it points to the multiple heritages that may be concealed in seemingly monolithic terms such as 'Geordie', 'whiteness' or 'Englishness'. I would suggest that melting the frozen status of white, English ethnicity, may allow for new, slippery points of identification and connection to emerge for white youth. Moreover, if these new ethnicities can be encouraged to flourish outside the ideological nexus that merges whiteness, racism and nationhood, there remains cause for hope.

### **Concluding Commentary**

Referring to Paul Gilroy's (1987) book *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (a title derived from a National Front slogan) Stuart Hall (1993:258) closes his essay on 'New Ethnicities' with the claim that until relatively recently he 'didn't care, whether there was any black in the Union Jack. Now not only do we care, we must'. By the same token, if white students are to feel able to contribute to anti-racism whatever their nationality may be, they must have subjective investments in a politics, that at times, has passed them by. Deconstructing the identities of ethnic majorities, with as much purpose and vigour as that of minority groups, should be a vital component of

anti-racist practice. A stumbling block that needs to be removed, is the perception that many white students (and parents) have of anti-racism as a bourgeois, anti-white practice. Here, suppressed white grievances could give way to an understanding that while racism 'works both ways', anti-racism does not. A more fruitful route to pursue in majority-white preserves, may be to connect anti-oppressive policies with local histories and the 'lived' culture of the community. As Raphael Samuel has noted, 'Local history also has the strength of being popular ... People are continually asking themselves questions about where they live, and how their elders fared' (1982:136-137). Embracing the popular in this way may entail a clearer understanding of the specificities of white, British Northern ethnicities, and engender a perspective which is hopefully more sensitive to marginal working-class experiences. Despite its reputation for racist violence Tyneside also boasts a legacy of anti-fascist resistance (Todd, 1995), a history of organised marches against nationalist extremists such as Enoch Powell and Oswald Moseley, a rarely acknowledged past of black settlement and habitation (Chapter 6). Moreover, the multiple styles of whiteness evoked by young people even in largely white enclaves implies a more sophisticated treatment of racism and anti-racism is required. Exposing the multiplicity and mutability of white experience remains imperative where the only recognisable forms of white, English identity for young men and women appear to be the 'Nazi-Skinhead' or the 'Blonde-bombshell'.

The following two chapters (Chapters 8, 9) which concern white ethnicity on Tyneside will explore how young people negotiate alternatives to the stereotypical racist Skinhead alluded to above and previously discussed elsewhere (Chapter 5). The chapters explore some of the recent positions that have emerged in the cracks beneath the cold, marble paving stones of white, English nationalism. As we shall find, these new subject positions do not necessarily ally themselves to an obvious, clear-cut anti-racist agenda. Nevertheless, they should give us pause for thought. The new-found spaces of 'inbetweenness' that operate somewhere betwixt the fissures of racism and anti-racism demonstrate the creative negotiation of white ethnicity that is undertaken by contemporary youth in the Northeast of England. A subcultural ethnographic method is again deployed (see Chapter 4, 5) to interpret the varied meaning of

whiteness in young people's peer-group cultures. Here, racialised intra-class differences and spatial variables are influential factors shaping the take-up of particular white cultural identities.

The following chapter compares two working-class youth subcultures, the Real Geordies and the Charver Kids. The comparison is in keeping with earlier historical portraits that were attentive to the different strata of working class labouring skills. For example, various gradations of social standing demarcated between the 'residuum', unskilled manual labourers, semi-skilled workers and technically skilled artisans. In the contemporary setting, this labouring delineation was subtly apparent in the different leisure pursuits of the Real Geordies and the Charver Kids and their respective subcultural style. The former subculture descended from a skilled labour background and viewed themselves to be a 'cut above' the lower echelons of the English working class. In contrast, the latter group were deemed to be impoverished urban residents whose 'common culture' (Willis, 1990) was source of mockery and rebuke. Significantly, these relations were given racialised meaning as the Real Geordies sought to embody the masculine ideal of the white labourer, while the Charvers were constructed through a number discourses as the not-quite-white of Tyneside.

The subcultural representations in the following two chapters offer critical insight into the 'doing' of whiteness amongst young people. As such, the mutability of white experience is seen when distinct enactments of white ethnicity can be identified. Moreover, the subcultures are, in part, defining social identities through and against one another in what can be described as a dynamic moment of negotiated existence. This 'making' and re-fashioning of whiteness indicates that ethnicity is as much a matter of 'being' as 'becoming' (Hall, 1993). In this respect, the subcultures can be read as a set of discursive clusters in which the struggle for white ethnicity is on-going. Although subcultural studies invariably tend to 'fossilize' their subjects (see Chapter 4) I hope the reader will bear in mind the contingency of these accounts. In conclusion, the multiple positions that young people occupy in relation to whiteness

can illustrate the specific nuances that come to inflect white cultural identities. An appreciation of these complexities may yet forge a path towards a better understanding of white youthful ethnicities in the future.

**‘Real Geordies’ and ‘Charver Kids’**

**Subculture, Social Class and Intra-ethnic Distinctions  
within Tyneside's Youth Community**

**Chapter 8**

## Introduction

In the previous chapter we investigated the youthful perspectives of the ethnic majority and in particular examined attitudes towards racism, anti-racism and white identity. The interpretation suggested that young people were struggling to fashion a positive white ethnicity in the present post-imperial moment. The responses revealed an underlying defensiveness regarding attitudes towards whiteness, Englishness and nationhood. That these emotions went largely unspoken meant that attitudes towards anti-racism were highly contradictory. Invariably, anti-racism was experienced as a 'split perception' in the lives of white youth. By and large they expressed a superficial allegiance to the doctrine of social equality and frowned upon extreme examples of racism. However, the issue of whiteness was even less certain. Many young people rejected the take-up of a racist subjectivity (a refusal of the Pale Warrior stance seen in Chapter 5) but nevertheless felt that the school's anti-racist policy as it currently stood was 'unfair' in its treatment of white students. The suppression of whiteness in this way meant that the local ethnic majority were often susceptible to a 'white backlash' of working-class intolerance. It was argued that unless white youth were allowed to critically engage with white, English ethnicity these tendencies would flourish. Subsequently, the chapter addressed the meaningfulness of white ethnicity in young peoples' lives through story-telling and narrative life histories. The biographies of cultural heritage incorporated 'white migrants' (Italians, Germans Scandinavians), those with Scottish, Welsh or Irish ancestry and further alluded to a number who espoused 'hyphenated' identities. This process of deconstruction ruptured the hitherto taken-for-granted status of white Anglo-ethnicity. With this fragmentation in mind, the remaining two chapters on Tyneside locales concern the 'making' and meaning of whiteness in youth culture. In short, how do young people 'do' whiteness?

In this next sequence from our Tyneside quartet we shall turn our attention to subculture, social class and the practice of whiteness amongst young people. The chapter aims to consider how the local political economy has left its trace upon subcultural formation and youthful identifications in the Northeast region. Moreover, the research demonstrates how social class positions are inflected through the prism of

ethnicity and the implications of this mutual articulation of white status. The chapter focuses on two distinct schooling subcultures in order to comprehend the divergent forms of white identity that are inhabited. It seeks to explore how, why and under what conditions versions of whiteness are enacted. This subcultural portrayal does not claim to exhaust the styles of whiteness available to young people, nor is it an attempt to suggest that there is an homogeneous set of typologies through which white identities are encoded (an issue discussed in Chapter 4). As such the youth subcultures explored in the thesis (see Chapters 5, 8, 9) can more accurately be interpreted as a set of *discursive clusters* around which young people position themselves and one another through. Here, the emphasis is not upon a particular typology of white behaviour but more specifically concerns the role of representation and the discursive meaning of whiteness. How whiteness is represented in youth culture through bodily practices and social ascription is one focus of the empirical chapters. Thus, the common-held perceptions that are attributed to subculture may have a great deal more to say about whiteness than they do about subcultural activity. In this sense, the aim is not to uncover 'authentic' subcultural members - the hunt for sacred 'insiders' was previously rendered problematic in Chapter 4 - but to reveal the contingency of white ethnicity in young peoples' social lives.

The subcultural approach adopted here and then further elaborated upon in Chapter 9, has specifically been used to investigate the various localised forms of white ethnicity that occur in a district as ostensibly white as the Tyneside conurbation. In this chapter the analysis will attempt to expose the production of whiteness within two youth subcultures known as the 'Real Geordies' and the 'Charver Kids'. The two subcultures constitute discursive clusters around which complex meanings of class and white ethnicity are struggled over. In particular, Charver Kids were subject to racialised representations made by other youth and it is these urban narratives concerning their behaviour that we shall investigate. As such the focus is not upon the authenticity of the subcultures concerned but rather with the discursive production of local youth communities. As we will go on to see, this does not render the social practices of these subcultures to be any less meaningful. Instead, it demonstrates how whiteness and social class identifications are produced within local peer-groups cultures and it is precisely these youthful formations that we are interested in here.



The comparative studies of Real Geordies and Charver Kids reveal the intra-ethnic and social class disparities that exist between each of the distinctive working-class groups. The social historian Robert Gray recounts how, 'The study of life-styles and leisure activities has been one fruitful approach to distinctions between working-class strata' (p.39), these differences can be vividly seen in the social practices and popular representations of Charver Kids and the Real Geordies. In this respect, the groups were contingently located in differing dominating and subordinating relations to whiteness. Here, it appeared that white ethnicity was not so much a category, structure or 'thing' but more accurately could be understood in terms of a process or relationship. The Real Geordies came from skilled labouring backgrounds and enacted a superior form of white elitism over the outcast Charver Kids, who by comparison were designated a not-quite-white status. This intra-ethnic distinction saw the Real Geordies experience of whiteness as a natural way of being, an identity that was only ever 'spoken' through class, regionalism and masculinity. As such they were arbiters of ethnicity who used their white labouring heritage to disparage the social standing of others. In this respect, Charvers remained estranged from white norms on account of their subcultural values and symbolic status as Tyneside's impoverished urban underclass.

### **The 'Real Geordies' - Skilled labour heritages and white privilege**

'At the end of the day, we're the Real Geordies and no-one can take that away from us' (Dave).

The above comment made by a member of the Real Geordies signifies the intense adherence to regional identity and felt notions of status. The Real Geordies were a self-identified group of white, working-class males who were ardent supporters of Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC). Their white ethnicities were sublimated into resolute forms of local identity that tell us much about the relationship between work, place and leisure. While other students sometimes mixed with the group, the core members comprised Jason, Shaun, John, Steve, Filo, Carl, Fat Mal, Dave, Cambo, Duane and Spencer. The coming-of-age experiences of the group were

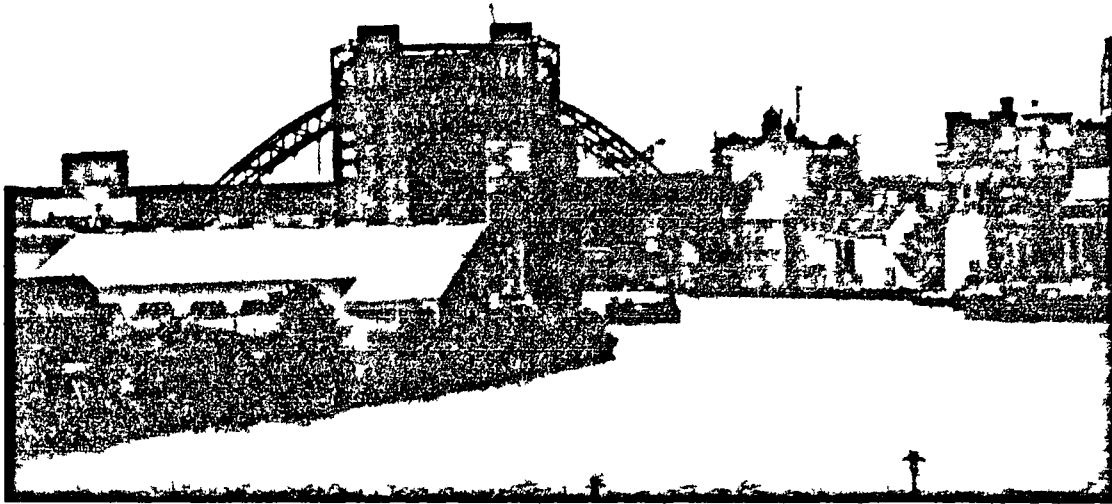
geographically specific to the Northeast and especially particular to certain areas of Tyneside. Aside from Carl, each of the Real Geordies came from families who were now classified as being owner-occupiers having purchased housing properties. They lived in districts that ranged from leafy suburban quarters to residential council housing estates on the city outskirts. A further definitive aspect of the social backgrounds of the Real Geordies was their labour heritage. A prominent masculine legacy of manual labour ran through their familial biographies. With few exceptions<sup>122</sup> all spoke of fathers, uncles and grandfathers who had developed specialist skills refined in the shipping industry, as sheet-metal workers, offshore operators, glaziers, fitters and mechanics. However, some members came from backgrounds where the tradition of manual labour had been sustained through the heavy, lesser-skilled industries of factory work, coal mining and dock work (see fig. 3.4). A smaller fraction also came from families connected to small businesses, including in one case a publican and in another, the proprietor of a fish-stall<sup>123</sup>. However, even in these latter cases tradition was important; each business had a history of family ownership and relied upon an established name. By and large then, the Real Geordies came from a particular stratum of the skilled English working class who would once have been understood as part of an older labour aristocracy.

The term, ““Working classes”” declares E.P. Thompson, ‘is a descriptive term which evades as much as it defines’ (1982[1968]:8). In his epic study of the history of occupational relations within English working class culture Thompson goes on to emphasise the *plurality* of labouring styles harboured beneath the label ‘working class’. Writing about the industrial period he notes how the concept, ‘ties loosely together a bundle of discrete phenomena’ (p.8) that comprise in truth, a variety of distinctive labouring and cultural traditions. In this light, it would be premature to synthesise the latter-day experiences of Charver Kids with those of the Real Geordies even though they each represent working-class factions. As we shall go on to see

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<sup>122</sup> Jono's father was a taxi-driver, Jason's ran a fish market stall and Shaun's family ran a pub. These individuals seemed to share the same subcultural status as the other Real Geordies. Moreover, they mentioned grandfathers and other relatives with an established tradition of manual labour in the North East.

<sup>123</sup> The labouring biographies are listed in the appendix.



*Fig. 3.4 Dockland development and the symbols of heavy industry in Tyneside.*

intra-class distinctions - and the ways these cultural differences draw upon an anatomy of race - are crucial to understanding white working-class experience.

Many Real Geordies had a masculine familial heritage that involved an element of craftsmanship in which labouring skills and techniques were acquired through apprenticeships and tutoring schemes. For example, skilled and semi-skilled occupations related to the construction industry commonly featured in their familial biographies. Cambo, Dave, Carl and Spencer had fathers and elder brothers who were employed in recognised trades including that of plumbers, tilers, joiners, 'brickies' and glaziers. Duane hoped to be a car-mechanic like his father; Filo's dad had worked as a docker before gaining an engineering qualification that enabled him to fit central-heating boilers; Steve's dad was a skilled electrician; Fat Mal's father was a foreman in a factory. Other members included Jonno whose father worked for a local cab firm; Shaun whose parents ran a family pub; Jason whose dad tended a popular fish stall in North Shields; and Bill whose dad had a well-paid job in a sheet-metal plant.

At a symbolic level, comparisons can further be made between such a skilled working class and the nineteenth-century rural artisans E.P. Thompson identifies:

Many of these rural craftsmen were better educated and more versatile and felt themselves to be a 'cut above' the urban workers - weavers, stockings or miners - with whom they came into contact when they came into the towns. (1982:260).

The Real Geordies too saw themselves as a 'cut above' especially in relation to ethnic minorities and the other prominent school subcultures, the Charver Kids and B-Boyz (Chapter 9). Group members took great pride in celebrating their elite status within that all too embracing category, 'working class'. As a labouring section of the community the Real Geordies could hold onto ideas that they were morally superior to lower working-class groups such as the Charver Kids whom they claimed were 'state spongers'.

For the Real Geordies, Charver Kids were both a source of amusement and disparagement. Moreover, representations of the latter subculture could be used to illustrate the higher status credentials of working class Real Geordies:

Fat Mal: It's like the Macauley's, a big Charver family reet, what reet have they got to expect everyone to help 'em?

Steve: Macauleys' a Netto family.

Sean: A nettie<sup>124</sup> family?

[*all laugh*]

All: A nettie family!

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<sup>124</sup> In local dialect the term nettie means outdoor toilet. The phrase was used to mock the poverty of Charver Kids and also draws upon longstanding discourses that associate the poor with bad smells, sewers and faeces (Introduction).

In the above extract a Charver family's rights to state provision were called into question by the Real Geordies. The Macauley's were branded a 'Netto family' on the basis that they shopped at cheap supermarket stores and bought home-brand products. The phrase 'Netto shopper' was a widespread term of abuse deployed by young people throughout the locality to deride those deemed less well-off. It was these subtle distinctions that enabled the Real Geordies to present themselves as a 'cut above' their lower working class peers. They regarded themselves as would-be-workers in contrast to the Charvers who were perceived as lazy with criminal tendencies. This enactment is itself part of a longer-standing racialised discourse in which ethnic minority groups have frequently been targeted as work-shy, with a greater propensity for crime. As the American historian David Roediger explains the 'worker' identity conveys much more than the mere act of labour:

In popular usage, the very term *worker* often presumes whiteness (and maleness) ... its actual usage also suggests a *racial* identity, an identification of whiteness and work so strong that it need not even be spoken (Roediger, 1992:19).

It was this 'unspoken' concept of workmanship that the Real Geordies evoked in their day-to-day activities as we shall go on to find. In many ways gender and ethnicity were displaced into locally specific practices and forms of identification symbolised in being a Real Geordie. Thus, the Real Geordies were similar to the 'Geordie' youth referred to by Coffield *et.al.* whose 'localism operated sometimes as a fortification behind which new ideas (like a multi-cultural society) could be ignored and parochialism flourish' (1986:143). In this respect, the subculture invoked regional identity in a more austere manner than other students and carefully 'policed' who could rightly lay claim to being an authentic 'Geordie'. Thus, their hidden investments in whiteness came to the fore when white privilege became a means of separating the subculture from lower-working class youth, ethnic minorities and young whites who experimented with their ethnicity<sup>125</sup>. In this sense, the Real Geordies represented the fringe of what had formerly been an older labour aristocracy,

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<sup>125</sup> Coffield *et.al.* (1986:3) also found that 'young people disagree among themselves about who is entitled to be called Geordie'. While this appears to be the case, closer investigation reveals that some youth have more influence than others when it comes to imposing these definitions of belonging.

and in doing so they invested in what Gray (1981:31) has described as the cult of the 'respectable artisan'. Certainly, the Real Geordies believed they resided within the 'respectable' wedge of working-class culture.

Moreover, the traces of this specific labour history had left their mark upon the practices of the Real Geordies. Elements of an industrial heritage were embodied in an appreciation of skilled physical labour over mental agility, a collective sharing of heavy, often sexual adult humour and an established drinking capability (see Taylor & Jamieson, 1997)<sup>126</sup>. Most recognisably, members took it upon themselves to enact the image of the 'Geordie hard man' in classroom interactions, in football matches on the playground, and, allegedly, upon the wider social landscape of the city. The Real Geordies promoted the values of a muscular puritan work ethic (honesty, loyalty, self-sufficiency, 'a fair day's work for a fair day's pay') in a situation where manual *unemployment* was now the norm. However, the longstanding economic situation meant that while some expressed upwardly mobile tendencies others did not (Hollands, 1990). The Real Geordies believed in 'hard graft' when it came to physical labour but felt the school did nothing to prepare them for what they invariably described as, 'the reel world' (Fat Mal). Consequently, they informed me that lessons were 'borin' mon' and claimed they could not see the point in learning about Shakespearean literature or complex mathematical formulas when this would be of little use beyond the classroom. When I pointed out that these skills might enable them to become more employable in the long-term, a familiar reply remained, 'There's nee propa jobs anyway' (Cambo). Instead, the Real Geordies knew that access to the jobs they required involved contacts, 'It's who yer kna, like' (Shaun), and as such saw through the contradiction in the national curriculum, 'Laarnin'? Far us! Nee point what so ever, the only thing I larnt is to hay'ut school!' (Filo).

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<sup>126</sup> Space does not allow for an adequate discussion of humour and masculinity here. Although there is a relative absence of visible minorities in the North East I managed to find evidence of a developed linguistic repertoire of racist jokes which I have recorded for future consideration. This would imply that racism is very much alive in mainly-white areas.

Other writers have also commented on how the labouring tradition in the region has given way to a particular set of working-class cultural values inscribed by masculinity:

[T]he attitude persists, as does the feelings among youngsters that it is soft and babyish to stay stuck behind a desk when one might be entering the man's world of the shipyard, the heavy engineering firm, the steelworks or the mine. These traditional industries, like the region itself, prize strength as well as skill (Taylor, 1976:33).

In the main the Real Geordies had already rejected the upwardly mobile passage into Further or Higher Education, careers and deskwork<sup>127</sup>. But this did not mean that they had rejected the work ethic itself. Steve may have been exceptional in that he was considering A-levels to improve his chances of working in a bank. Moreover, he spoke discreetly to me about considering options for Higher Education. Also, Duane wanted to do a B-Tech in mechanical engineering at a local college while a number of others showed preferences for similar vocational courses. Others such as Filo had learnt much about fitting boilers from his father but at present lacked approved qualifications. Similarly, Cambo frequently speculated that there was 'stacks' to be made in building conservatories but was unsure quite how to proceed with putting this plan into action. Carl and Jason, meanwhile, wanted to extend their current part-time employment in the service sector. They felt assured in the knowledge that while such work meant it remained financially difficult to leave the family home in the immediate future, employment offered them the opportunities to work a regular shift from 'nine to five'. Consequently, they saw little point in saving their money and were determined to spend it on clothes, drink, music, football and 'living for the weekend'. As such, they envisaged contributing to the family wage and felt their overall quality of life would be relatively high. It was within the sphere of leisure and consumption that the Real Geordies were now better able to establish their regional identities.

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<sup>127</sup> Methodologically, this caused problems as I had started to get to know some of these members before they departed at 16 years. The majority of our discussions took place through informal daily chat as members tended to be on work experience during the scheduled interview slots. As our contact was shorter than I envisaged, I had initially aimed to get to know individuals before proceeding with formal interviews. However, some group interviews were conducted and field notes kept relating to my observations.

In this sense, when it came to the world of labour, the Real Geordies were not 'work shy' as one staff member claimed, nor were they devoid of employment strategies. Instead, they were negotiating various paths that would *preserve* rather than eradicate their subcultural allegiance to football, drinking and going out. The transition into work was as much about continuity as change. Ultimately, they recognised the fragility of this situation in a changing world where new skills and flexible patterns of work were increasingly being demanded. For these reasons they treated Further/Higher Education with a degree of scepticism unless it was directly related to a trade. Not least for these reasons they saw schooling as being of little worth. Thus, many of the Real Geordies cited work experience as the highlight of their education not because they had necessarily enjoyed the work but more importantly, they understood its meaning and were treated 'like adults'. In this context it made little sense to apply oneself academically when reputations could be more quickly established within the accepted registers of working-class masculinity which valued strength, loyalty, humour and physical stature. As we shall now find, in the out-of-work situation the meaning of 'Geordie' was being constituted elsewhere, in the realm of leisure and consumption. For the subculture concerned, 'Geordie' identity was now most noticeably being re-fashioned in two zones - football and the practice of going out drinking. Each of these arenas held parallels with the workplace in offering a space for masculine bonding, routine and identity formation. As E.P. Thompson has argued issues of class-consciousness must be understood in terms of historical relations that have cultural meaning, 'embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms' (1982:8). Moreover, a sociological analysis of football and drinking is undertaken as each of these arenas were also spaces in which the normative practice of white ethnicity was evident.

### *Refashioning 'Geordie': Football-fandom*

Offspring on Otterburn moors, mostly they breathed  
 coal dust in damp seams.  
 Offspring of rugged crags, white rivers and winds,  
 mostly they tunnelled Black Gold.  
 Most, hearing the term GEORDIE understood something  
 philologists and rationalists failed



to explain.

They learned the earth at its dark core.

Alan C. Brown - *Geordies*.

With its once famous shipbuilding industry, the Northeast became a symbol of the 'Iron North', and its workers were regularly depicted as having an iron, masculine constitution to match. However, the economic situation of the Real Geordies was now especially uncertain in view of what now appears to be the permanent collapse of the local 'hard' economic infrastructure. The legacy of this past has seen the erasure of 38% of Tyneside's manufacturing employment between 1978-1984. This has resulted in the surrender of the concept of life-long employment with a firm, in which the cultivated attributes of the Real Geordies - loyalty, hard graft and routine - would now go unappreciated. Moreover, the civic pride of the Real Geordies made them less socially mobile than their peers as they registered an unwillingness to leave the area (some indicated that ownership of a NUFC season ticket was too much to sacrifice). In place of the declining local economy, a number of international investors have attempted to capitalise on the skilled and semi-skilled labour in the region. In contrast to the previous era of thriving regional industries, the globalisation of labour markets appears to have resulted in a more flexible notion of employment. Thus, between 1978-1991 the region has seen a massive population exodus of 22% who have relocated in the South or elsewhere<sup>128</sup>. Indeed, the closure of micro-electronic plants such as Fujitsu and Siemens in the Northeast has incurred large-scale job losses, these have severely impinged upon the work-based horizons of the Real Geordies. The closure of these sites most directly affected the group who witnessed the devastating impact of redundancy first-hand. With the local employment situation so unstable, the transition into the masculine world of work would remain, in many cases, as if in a perpetual state of deferral. As such the Real Geordies were like flies in amber having become petrified in the hardened solution of an older period from which their values descended.

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<sup>128</sup> In contrast, it is estimated that the next twenty years will witness a population increase of 13% in the Southeast due to the incoming movement of peoples from other areas in the country.

In Chapter 6 we discussed the meaning of the term ‘Geordie’ and its connection with heavy manual labour, especially that associated with the coal-mining industry. In the light of this definition the crucial question remains: if the Real Geordies can no longer be ‘Real’ in the true occupational sense, then just who are they in the present socio-economic situation? As we shall find the Real Geordie identity was being consolidated in other social arenas beyond that of the traditional workplace. Indeed, the masculine subculture was itself a means of sustaining a symbolic form of community. If a shared labour heritage was one point of commonality used by the Real Geordies to invoke an imaginary sense of community, then football and public house drinking were equally important as others. We shall discuss each of these practices in turn. Most Real Geordies held season tickets at St. James’s Park and were critical of ‘armchair’ supporters, viewers who only watched the team in domestic settings on television. Supporting the ‘Mags’ was an embodied, full-time occupation and involved considerable expense for a hard-core minority who followed the team home and away. Escapades relating to fighting, drinking, being chased etc. were recounted with as much gusto as goals (see also Robins, 1984). For this group, being ‘Geordie’ meant *physically* supporting the team on the terraces and beyond. They insisted that it was important to ‘stand up for yersel’ against both official authority (teachers, the police, public figures) and in other situations (during family disputes, in response to opposing football supporters, in street-fights). Moreover, they pointed out how their fathers had done the same thing when they were young and even encouraged this masculine posture as a sign of developing manhood: perfect preparation for world of work.

The young men in this study epitomised John Hall’s ‘Geordie Nation’, that is, they saw NUFC as the cornerstone on which Real Geordies were brought into being. On match-days they took pride in being part of a social collective, NUFC’s ‘Toon Army’. Even so, the practices of the group served to highlight the difficulty in affirming this identity when creative economic negotiations had to take place in order *to be seen* to support the club. For example, some of the young men shared season tickets in an

attempt to spread the expense; a few had taken up part-time jobs<sup>129</sup>; some relied on parental sacrifices which were paid back in other ways; a couple of members claimed to simply 'know people'; others got fast cash as reputed dealers in 'dodgy goods'. Overall, many of the Real Geordies displayed a startling creativity when it came to financing their support of NUFC and while this activity stretched them financially it would be improper to view them as impoverished supporters. Another means of balancing support for the team against economic hardship was to watch games screened in pubs and a local cinema as a compensatory manoeuvre. This secondary viewing activity, though no substitute for 'gannin' the gemme', was recognised as a reaction to a tight financial situation, and symbolically given prestige over the practices of the 'armchair supporter'. Significantly, drinking and collective viewing allowed for the match-time experience to be recreated in the male environment of the public house. Furthermore, just as certain parts of the ground are mythologised as 'home ends' (in this case, the Gallogate End), particular pubs, notably *The Three Bulls* and those in Strawberry Place nearest St. James', were seen as more appropriate viewing points for these 'celluloid supporters'. As the phrase suggests, these supporters could *simulate* being at the match, but would have to authenticate their allegiances further if they wanted to be taken seriously as 'Real'.

Being a Real Geordie became an embodied activity that stretched from donning the shirt to having NUFC emblems tattooed on the skin. Fighting, drinking and vociferously cheering the team on were all part of the corporeal labour involved. It was with some precision that the Real Geordies could recall match results, names of goal-scorers and times at which goals had been taken, yet at the same time they looked down on some other NUFC supporters who had achieved this knowledge and derided them as 'anoraks'. The Real Geordies depicted 'anoraks' as supporters who studiously supported the team, had a penchant for statistics, but were ultimately (like the 'ear'oles' Willis (1977) encountered) passive observers. The split between having a 'mental' knowledge of the team and a 'physical' know-how gleaned from first-hand

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<sup>129</sup> This included paper-rounds, working in garages, stacking supermarket shelves and so forth. However, the nature of some part-time work was often unclear and, I am led to presume, may have been illegal. As Coffield *et.al.* found in their North-East study, 'For generations of working-class people unofficial jobs have been a vital means of defending self respect, maintaining a basic income and preserving existing skills in times of unemployment' (1986:79).

experience was used to distinguish them as 'Real' in comparison with other school student supporters. Local youth who supported the club, then, broadly consisted of Real Geordies who regularly went 'the gemme', 'celluloid supporters' who gathered in a pub, and 'armchair supporters' and 'anoraks' who watched quietly or listened to NUFC on Sky TV or local radio in the privacy of a domestic setting. Notably, this 'armchair' viewing was regarded as a feminised activity, a move away from the male-bonding achieved in the public house or stadium, towards women and the family. The Real Geordies distinguished between such gendered public and private viewing, discriminating positively in favour of the former and negatively against the latter. These viewing practices were neither separate nor distinct, however, as members would often combine each of these activities depending on finances, if NUFC were playing away, or if they had other social commitments. Thus, the claim to be 'authentic' or Real was in actuality more complex than it first appeared. Nevertheless, undying loyalty to the club at all times was expected amongst those who identified themselves under the Real Geordies label.

### *Refashioning Geordie: Drinking and going out*

A pint with the boys  
In a buffle of noise  
That's livin' alright.

'Living alright' - Theme from *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*.

The current fascination with a 'Night on the Toon' has seen Newcastle represented less as a city with a declining manufacturing infrastructure, and more as a place for the hedonistic activities of drinking and clubbing. As the *Newcastle University Student Union Handbook for 1996/7* declares, 'Newcastle is rightly famed for its pubs. After all, where else in the country is the Friday/Saturday night session such an institution?' (p.54). Accordingly, some writers have commented that 'Newcastle has also rarely been far from the top of the nation's drunkenness table' (Bean, 1971:223). Coffield *et.al.* (1986:132-133) also found, 'The strongest tradition followed by the young adults we knew was drinking alcohol'. They go on to point towards how, 'The importance of drinking to the local community was reflected in the large number of

words used for being drunk, including “stottin”, “mortal”, “pissed” and “smashed”. Furthermore, a rather spurious survey account presented in the national press rated Newcastle as the eighth party city in the world, cultivating the image of the ‘Geordie’ well beyond the former boundaries of an occupational legacy<sup>130</sup>. These current representations are a sharp contrast to the drab, industrial image of the city as replete with old miners in flat-caps, grey factories, dog racing and fog on the Tyne (see for example the consciously bleak 1971 film production *Get Carter*, directed by Mike Hodges).

Despite these changes the Real Geordies maintained ‘felt’ investments in the traditional basis of working-class culture. These emotions were present in their nostalgic affection for the region; the emphasis on male drinking pursuits; a heavy, physical humour; the smattering of stories about fighting and sexual exploits; the abundant parochial conservatism which coloured much of their opinions<sup>131</sup>. The Real Geordies enjoyed dressing in smart shirts and meeting up with one another in town. They would pass through a series of pubs usually having just one drink in each as they linked up with other members. This display allowed them to be seen in a number of public places and so belied the appearance that they saved all their money for the end of week drinking binge. These patterns accompanied Bigg Market drinking and can be seen as a suitable (if expensive) modern equivalent to the monkey parades familiar in nineteenth century working class culture (see Chapter 1). Furthermore, those who missed the preliminary meeting place could join the chain at another venue since members seemed to share an intimate knowledge of where the gang would be. Circuit drinking remained, then, a highly regulated activity forged through familiar rituals and routine practices. The Real Geordies all dressed in subtle variations of a recognised

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<sup>130</sup> The controversial report taken from an in-flight magazine should be taken less seriously as a sign of Newcastle's cultural night-life and more as evidence of the regard in which working-class cities are deemed to be places for excessive partying and wild stag nights.

<sup>131</sup> While a number of examples occurred in interview it may be unjust to represent these comments out of context. Moreover, my time spent with the Real Geordies elicited a spectrum of contrary opinions that differed during individual and collective interviews. However, the North East individual described by Coffield *et.al.* (1986) bears more than a fleeting resemblance to one strand of the multifaceted personalities of the Real Geordies: ‘Reg did not attempt to disguise or hide his strongly held opinions; he was against blacks, gays and trade unions and was not prepared to listen to counter arguments. At school he had acquired the reputation of a fighter, of being “the hardest lad” who had fought when challenged but generally his reputation prevented trouble’ (p.32).

style, they knew which pubs would be frequented and in exactly which spots the others could be found; at all times, they never lost sight of whose turn it was to get the drinking round in. Moreover, they had a detailed knowledge of the price of drinks in corresponding venues and were on week days able to map out their drinking circuit to take advantage of ‘happy hours’, ‘two-for-one’ offers and the like<sup>132</sup>. Bottled lagers were favoured at the time of the research as they allowed the lads to encompass a larger drinking territory than would otherwise have been possible if pints were taken at each establishment<sup>133</sup>. New places were always given a try, assessed accordingly and subsequently incorporated or rejected from future drinking routes. Visiting a number of venues provided a structure for the evening, it offered variety and allowed the subculture to have a heightened public display in the city centre. Moreover, it appeared to increase the potential of ‘funny happenings’ and can be understood as a modern-day form of promenading.

In this way, the subculture recuperated older forms of an industrial white masculinity through collective rituals related to male drinking, fighting, football, and sexual conquest. As Phil Cohen (1997:205) writes, ‘Growing up working-class has for many meant an apprenticeship to such an inheritance - a patrimony of skill entailed in the body and its techniques, forging a quasi-congenital link between origins and destinies’. Thus, ‘funny stories’ referring to passing out, throwing-up or acting completely out of character when under the influence of alcohol were reported - such as the time Filo insisted on urinating from the Tyne Bridge and ended up with ‘pissed-streaked troowzers!’, or the occasion when Fat Mal ruined his best silk shirt when he fell asleep on top of his kebab and chilli sauce after a heavy night out with the lads, and so on and so forth. The Real Geordies would constantly reminisce about these past events and appeared to derive great satisfaction from relating these tales to one another. Indeed, there was something profoundly nostalgic about their recourse to older values or traditions in the region and the tendency to continually revert to mythic stories related to classroom pranks, nights out, and historic football games.

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<sup>132</sup> While heavy drinking in the middle of the week was unusual special occasions such as a birthday celebration could involve a night out.

<sup>133</sup> Other advantages were that drinking from bottles made drinks harder to spike in darkened clubs. Also, when money was tight, bottled drinks could be slowly sipped and made to last longer as the amount of liquid inside was concealed.

Most evidently, the Real Geordies were nostalgic about a time they had never experienced. Moreover, this selective memory which cited great 'Geordie' players of the past, periods of full employment and the bustle of thriving industries on the Tyne do not necessarily stand up to historical scrutiny when an analysis of the local economy is made. In this respect it is not past events themselves that were of significance but the emotional investments that were felt to be embodied in these real or imagined social practices.

And yet leisure activities related to terrace chanting or Bigg Market drinking may not be so far removed from those present within work-based cultures. Local writers such as Bill Lancaster have gone as far to claim that 'Geordie' identity, which can no longer be sustained in the occupational sense, is instead sublimated through notions of the 'carnavalesque':

'Pit-hardened' young males, with no pit or shipyard within which to vent their machismo, sublimate their traditional industrial toughness into the carnivalesque ... Indeed, it could be argued that the carnivalisation of popular culture provides a vital emotional prop for coping with rapid change (1992:61).

By interpreting the diverse social practices of the Real Geordies (gannin' the match, Bigg Market drinking, having a 'laff') as a 'vital emotional prop' in uncertain times, we gain further insight into the deep investments they make in these activities. In short, it was through these self-confirming rituals that the subculture could sustain the illusion of authenticity, a symbolic enactment that at once revealed the performance entailed in inhabiting the identity of a Real Geordie. At the same time, the performance was also a discursive articulation of a matrix of relations, constructed through sexuality, gender, class and ethnicity. Thus, whilst it would be inaccurate to argue that the Real Geordies directly mirrored the culture of the workplace in their day-to-day activities, there could be no denying that they retained a symbolic attachment to the established forms of white, working-class masculinity produced in the labouring sphere. In this sense, the contemporary fragile labour relations within the Tyneside economy could

be offset at a symbolic level through the recuperation of a repertoire of older past-times and practices.

There remain some striking connections, then, between the wider cultural practices of the Real Geordies and their socio-economic situation. At a time when ‘Geordie’ identity can no longer be produced in the labour market, the wearing of a NUFC shirt, with the embossed bottle of ‘Newky Brown’, may offer a means of ‘magically resolving’ these apparent contradictions<sup>134</sup>. Read in this light, the shared labour heritage of the Real Geordies and their collective practices can be seen as an ‘oblique’ subcultural response to the relationship between political economy and culture (Hebdidge, 1987). The precarious economic situation of the Real Geordies was exacerbated by the fact that many had chosen to leave school when GCSEs were completed. Lacking social mobility and training experience the task of securing stable employment would not be easy. The tension in this situation was all the more acute in the absence of a robust apprenticeship culture to enable a smoother transition into the skilled labour force. In these circumstances the Real Geordies economically came to occupy the position of a residual culture. In this light, the shadow of an industrial past was an additional pressure reminding Real Geordies that they came from a background which historically would have established them as employable sectors of the working community. It is to this imaginary past that we shall now turn to with a view to better understanding how its symbolic associations were currently being re-worked in the present through the subcultural practices of football and drinking.

*A labour aristocracy: The price of an industrial inheritance*

When people speak of ... having “coal in their bones”, they are talking about an apprenticeship to this kind of inheritance ... the assertion of this kind of proprietorial pride involves strategies of social closure which define all those who are held to lack such credentials as ‘outsiders’ and a potential threat (Cohen, 1993[1988]:33).

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<sup>134</sup> The link between football, drinking and sponsorship is further enhanced in the case of NUFC as Newcastle Breweries is situated opposite St. James’ Park.



As we saw in the previous chapter, the concept of 'Geordie' has changed over the years. However, its original meaning as 'pit-worker' continues to be of symbolic significance despite mass pit closure in the Northeast region. That the Real Geordies could never be 'real' in the true occupational sense did not mean that a number of symbolic associations could not take place. As Cohen remarks above, the idea of 'coal in your bones' is itself a type of apprenticeship literally embodied in the sublimated white, male, working-class practices we have discussed. As a birthright, the image has a privileged place in the psychic economy of Tyneside youth that extends into other aspects of life. Notably, many of the Real Geordies recounted how their initiation into drinking culture took place not in the peer group but through 'Wor Fathas' or elder brothers and cousins. This feeling of cultural inheritance is captured by Coffield *et.al.* (1986:147-148): 'Heavy drinking has a long history in the North East and the traditions of drinking as a relaxation after dirty and dangerous work have passed down from generation to generation'. Another parallel between football and this labour inheritance was later made when the Real Geordies told me about the acquisition of match-tickets. Apparently, limited seating at St. James' Park meant that the waiting-list for season tickets spanned a number of years<sup>135</sup>. However, many of the Real Geordies 'inherited' tickets from their fathers and older male members and so continued to occupy the same spaces in the ground as had been done in previous generations. At the level of the local, the notion of 'inheritance' was also considerable as other researchers in the North East have commented, 'they came from it, lived it and, eventually, they would pass it on' (Coffield *et.al.* 1986:117).

In these comments one may be reminded of the importance of the 'Dene' to the Skinheads in Chapter 5, who proudly embodied the status of the local through their haircuts and actions. Yet while these comparisons can be made, there are some significant points of difference related to the North East as a regional economic outpost. Where Skinhead subculture had been a response to the social class tensions experienced on Kempton Dene, it was - lest we forget - also a reaction against

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<sup>135</sup> Once access to a season ticket was granted it had to be renewed on an annual basis by the payee or relinquished.

Birmingham's black British communities who mainly resided in parts of the middle-ring and inner city. Thus, the Skinheads embodied a response of white hostility which in subcultural terms was outwardly more 'spectacular' than that manifested by the Real Geordies who on the surface had little need to make clear their white allegiance. If the Pale Warriors in Chapter 5 exhibited an exaggerated, hyper-whiteness then the Tyneside subculture lived out whiteness as the norm. This may explain the sublimation of whiteness through regionalism. But a further distinguishing feature remains: the locally specific investments the Real Geordies have in the declining regional work-based activities of mining, shipping and steel-related industries.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Real Geordies exuded a self-righteous confidence in the face of the prevailing bleak economic situation. It is my contention that the subculture were able to maintain the *illusion* of white masculine prowess despite the depletion of the manufacturing base by re-invoking their industrial heritage in other ways, as we saw primarily in relation to football. Loyalty to the region as expressed through the support of NUFC, and the perseverance of working-class manliness exhibited through drinking, fighting, humour and alleged sexual prowess, made this transition temporarily possible. In effect, an imaginary set of identifications was taking place that engaged with recognised forms of industrial white masculinity. The empty space left by de-industrialisation was thereby filled by the 'hereditary' promise of a white manhood that could be acquired in other social arenas. Thus, the Real Geordies could embody the heroic elements of manual labour through an appeal to unofficial classroom cultures. According to Cohen, white working-class males may 'live their class subjection through the proto-domestic features of their labour, but in such a way as to dissociate themselves from both by assuming imaginary positions of mastery linked to masculine "pride in place"' (1993:82). That these relations may be an 'imaginative' re-working of a mythic version of working-class culture does not diminish their significance, nor does it alter the 'lived realities' of growing up as working class in the Northeast of England. That the subculture were deeply nostalgic about a period they had never experienced did not lessen their sense of estrangement. They were men out of time; the unreconstructed outsiders-within whose claim to regional authenticity remained forever symbolic. The fictitious relationship the Real

Geordies had with a former world of manual labour meant that to all intents and purposes and they existed as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1984).

Even so, some had plans for future employment that extended their part-time work, already undertaken to pay for match tickets, while others had considered job schemes or were generally uncertain<sup>136</sup>. Many saw 'the match' as a male legacy, a spectacle they hoped to instil into their own sons in time. Indeed, there are a number of parallels that can be drawn between the worlds of work and leisure. Locals may recall that prior to the closure of the Swan Hunter shipyard the then-manager Kevin Keegan and the NUFC players visited the Wallsend yard in 1994 in a bid to support the 'Save Our Swan's' campaign. The ex-manager drew striking comparisons between NUFC and Swan Hunter: 'Swan Hunter and Newcastle United are very much at one with each other', he stated before adding, 'the club went through a bad time but we have turned the corner' (*The Journal*, 4/3/94, p.17). In this reading of regional identity the plight of NUFC can be compared to Swan Hunter while the supporters can be likened to the shipyard workers, for in Keegan's words, 'It's almost a political thing' (p.17)<sup>137</sup>. And yet while we can allude to the overlaps between the practice of supporting NUFC and masculine rituals associated with physical labour - routine, loyalty, the incursions on time, a collective camaraderie - in all but the most rare cases, football could never offer a career.

Instead, it was at the symbolic level (a father's dream, a running commentary on the back-streets, the wearing of a football-shirt with the name of Alan Shearer) that football and football-support became a substitute for work. Consequently, it is unlikely that the masquerade of a labouring identity can be so successfully sustained into adulthood and future family life, where the markers of manhood are materially orchestrated around fixed notions of the 'bread winner'. Coffield *et.al.* (1986) take issue with studies which claim adult unemployment is worse on the basis that young

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<sup>136</sup> As part of the Labour Party's New Deal, the unemployed in Wearside have been offered free match tickets if they decide to partipate in the back to work scheme.

<sup>137</sup> Indeed, the majority of Wallsend shipyard labourers are NUFC supporters. Furthermore, a plan had been formulated for a charity match to be played in which NUFC would donate the proceedings to the Save Our Swan's campaign.

people have no occupational identities to shatter. While this challenge is valid, they go on to state that 'young adults who never have had a job have no occupational identity at all - they are not even an unemployed shop assistant or joiner, they are simply *unemployed*' (p.81). Instead, my time spent with the Real Geordies appeared to indicate that these young people *were* enacting the unspoken traces of an occupational culture that had been socially embedded through familial biographies and shared regional peer-group values. Thus, while the collapse of traditional apprentice schemes may have affected the Real Geordies most markedly in view of their familial labour histories, it had not dislodged their *investments* in an industrial lineage. Rather, these imaginary points of identification with manual, life-long occupational culture were foundational to the practice of a Real Geordie identity. As Taylor *et.al.* (1996:34) found in their study of the English Northern cities of Sheffield and Manchester, 'cultures originally associated with local workplaces (the cotton mill, the docks, the steel works, or the cutlery workshop) "escape" into the larger local culture generally and leave their indelible imprint or traces over time at several different levels within that local social formation'. In the case of Tyneside, the cultures associated with the local industries of steel, coal-mining and shipbuilding were re-fashioned by the Real Geordies through bodily practices and a range of social activities which mythologised manual work-based culture albeit with subtle, contemporary nuances.

In a study of post-industrial masculinities in Sheffield, Taylor and Jamieson (1997) draw attention to the economic and cultural value still retained through the nostalgic remembrance of former apprenticeship schemes in the steel industry. Drawing on the work of Bob Connell (1995), they found that the cult of being 'Little Mesters' - that is the 'master cutler' - was symbolically carried by contemporary generations of young men and experienced as a 'protest' form of masculinity. The authors point out that although masculinity is recognised as closely tied to the concept of labour, 'What does not follow, however, is that ... "loss of work" necessarily entails the sudden and total evacuation of men from the *symbolic terrain* of work, or the loss of work references in the discursive construction of hegemonic forms of masculinity' (1997:166). Certainly, this was the case for the Real Geordies who were evoking what Raymond

Williams (1973a[1971]) has described as a 'structure of feeling' in his recognised volume, *The Long Revolution*. As Williams explains, 'the new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities, that can be traced, and reproducing many aspects of the organisation, which can be separately described, yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling' (1973a:65). As we shall now see, the identification with a 'golden past' as celebrated through a specific brand of localism also had a detrimental effect upon other youth subcultures in the district. Ultimately, the Real Geordies construed themselves as the eternal 'backbone of the nation' - salt-of-the-earth natives whom had failed to inherit an industrial heritage that was rightfully theirs.

### **'Charver Kids' - Tyneside's not-quite-white urban underclass**

The undisciplined bodies of male working-class youth and their discursive association with 'deviancy' and 'juvenile delinquency' have long remained a point of concern within the fields of law and criminology (Collier, 1998). At periods this view of 'lawless youth' has become intrinsically racialised. Paul Gilroy (1995:81) refers to articles in *The Times* as late as 1958 in which 'Teddy boys and their urban community were described as a 'race' in their own right'. We may also consider the remarks made by John Lydon of The Sex Pistols in 1977 which featured in the musical paper *Rolling Stone* and proclaimed, 'Punks and Niggers are almost the same thing' (Young, 20/10/77). For our focus on youthful social collectivities, the description of subcultures - such as the Teds, Punks or Skinheads - as a separate race remains crucial. These representations can lend rare insight into the racialisation of white youth and may provide some clue to the occasional display of white identity within these groupings. In an oral history analysis of working-class youth Stephen Humphries (1981:175) also remarks on the propensity for pre-war street gang members to be delegated labels such as 'savage hooligan', 'slum monkey' and 'street blackguard'. Such epithets served to demarcate between a 'rough' and 'respectable' working class while leaving unchecked the strong current of circulating racial undertones. Stanley Cohen (1974) has taken this point further in his press analysis of

Newcastle gangs, claiming, 'The teenager is given the same characteristics as the Negro' (p.43). Contemporary descriptions by politicians and the tabloid press of football fans, subcultures and working-class youth as 'yobs' and 'animals' is a suitable *addendum* to a vocabulary that has frequently defined young people to be 'beyond the pale'.

This second study of Northeast subculture and whiteness examines the status of lower working-class youth who reside in the interior West End district of the Tyneside conurbation. The term Charver has various inflections though its origins remain uncertain. One reading emphasises that the term has Romany connections associated with travellers. Another suggests the word is derived from a hybrid combination of the archetypal allegedly lower-class names, Sharon and Trevor (i.e. Shar/vor). In one case white youth elaborated on the term Charver to shout 'Charwallah' (a term that refers to Indian tea-servants) at another white student, thus providing the phrase with the additional derogatory value of a lower race and class status. Others still, have suggested that regional variations of this phrase (e.g. Chavvy) exist in other areas beyond the North East. Regardless of the precise definition, Charver is defined across a shared discourse of lower working-class origins. The section will consider popular discursive representations of Charver Kids and relate this to the nineteenth century historical representations of the urban poor discussed in Chapter 1. It is argued that Charver Kids represent an inner-city underclass, and, for a variety of reasons, have become subject to a racialised discourse that constructs them as urban primitives. The section will examine this discourse to illustrate how the meaning of white ethnicity came to be devalued in this context by drawing attention to differences in social class, habitation and subcultural activity.

### *'The Talk of the Toon': Urban representations of Charver Kids*

The Charver Kids were a subculture identifiable to local youth throughout Tyneside. My first encounter with Charvers occurred in a second Tyneside school I visited, where the interviewees were aged 9-12 years. Charver Kids were boys and girls who

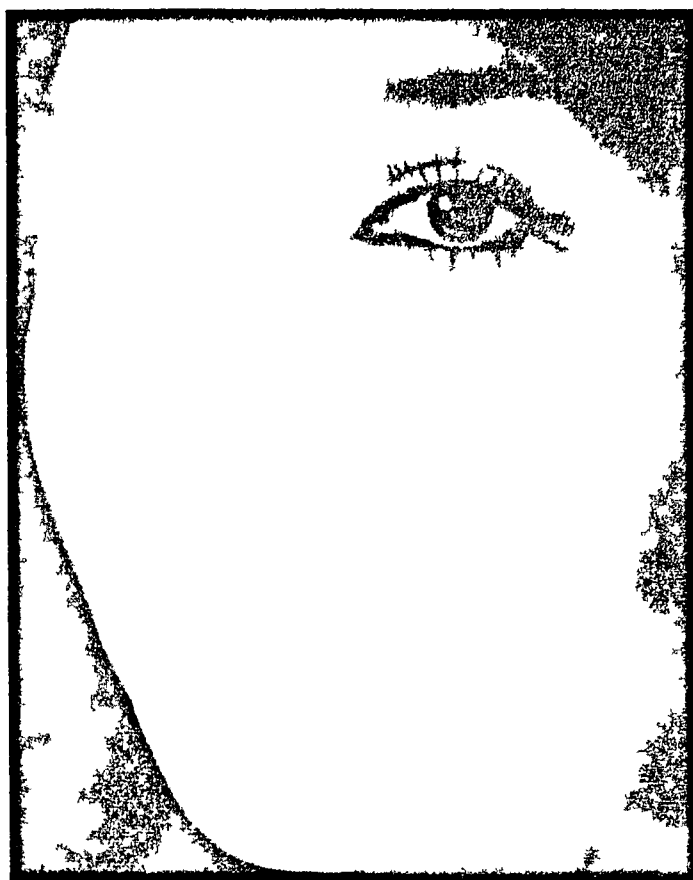
resided primarily in the West End district of the city, were reputed to be burglars or 'joy-riders' and had developed a particular style of dress and body language. Renowned truants from school, the group were notoriously difficult to track down and interview over long periods as they had the poorest school attendance records. However, my knowledge about Charvers, and the discourses that constituted them, also derived from Tyneside folklore and local representations. In certain respects Charver Kids are the living embodiment of urban mythology. The association between Charver families, crime and 'trouble' was an enduring one. Indeed, the after-hours drinking club WHQ which promotes an anti-racist attitude advertise their venue as 'Friendly, multi-racial, & totally charver free' (fig. 3.5). The Charver Kids regarded street crime as an everyday reality of residing in the area of the West End (see Chapter 6).

Significantly, though the Charver Kids and the Real Geordies were both working class subcultures, they did not share the same social histories. Charvers did not carry the industrial baggage of manual labour borne by the Real Geordies. Whereas the latter group had been part of an aspiring working-class culture that sanctioned 'white flight' from the inner city, the Charvers remained firmly entrenched in their urban environment. In this regard they are comparable with the 'residuum' discussed by nineteenth century urban observers (Chapter 1). As *lower* working class youth, Charvers were alleged to come from large, extended families with histories of long-term unemployment sometimes punctuated by prison sentences. Thus, during the research the father of one of the Charver Kids was arrested after a violent brawl with Pakistani workers that involved weapons and took place outside a West-End take-away<sup>138</sup>. Moreover, Charver families were constituted as threatening and undisciplined through a type of racialised discourse that maintained they 'bred like rabbits', were replete with single-parent households, and were benefit 'scroungers' who 'canna control the bairnes'. This discourse was frequently employed by adults and young people alike and was also extended to depict 'Makems' (people from

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<sup>138</sup> It is uncertain whether this event was a racially motivated attack as I only have the student's account which blamed the Pakistani workers as the main aggressors against her father. However, the fact that the police arrested the father, someone who had already served a prison sentence, and not the workers may lead one to assume otherwise.

## **"Boss Music and a Fine Time"**



**fri y, i-r i l,  
t y ch rver f ee.  
pub p es a d sa p le like you.  
e Fr-S t N g ts 1 .30-3.0 , go.**

*Fig. 3.5 WHQ: Anti-racist but anti-charver.*

Sunderland). Like other youth subcultures, Charver Kids were seen to be synonymous with trouble, and were a source of 'moral panic' amongst parents, teachers, and residents in 'respectable' neighbourhoods.

Students at Emblevale School provided me colourful portraits of Charver Kids:

Nicola: Wor street isn't posh cos there's loadsa Charvers round wor street.



Anoop: *Who are the Charvers?*

Michelle: Like, they're from the West End like Nicky, with dyed bleached hur, like you [*laughs at Nicola*] and they aal wear Kappa and they've got hur really lacquered back and they talk [*affects deep voice*] 'like this mon'.

Michelle: They think they're dead hard.

Sam: Ya see them walking roon' the toon and everythin'.

Michelle: With their head down and with an arched back and they think they're dead good.

James: They think they're real gangstas.

The depiction of Charvers as a 'gangsta' subculture geographically embedded in the West End adds to the street-credibility of these urbanised youth<sup>139</sup>. Thus, Nicola immediately equates a dangerous, metropolitan area with Charvers to provide evidence that her street 'isn't posh'. Previously in Chapter 5 we saw how Skinhead youth could evoke the notion of the 'inner city' and construe it as a space filled with dangerous black youth. As with other subcultures who have developed subversive linguistic codes (e.g. Rastas) or body postures (e.g. Punks), the Charvers have cultivated their own styles of talk and body regulation. This embodied portrayal is similar to those previously enacted between differing social economic groups according to reports conducted in Victorian and Edwardian England. Moreover, such characteristic walks and styles of behaviour (disparaged in terms such as the 'monkey walk' or 'monkey run') continue to resonate with earlier perceptions of the working-class body. Accordingly, Charvers were said to affect a loping stride and exaggerated, rough 'Geordie' accents. The Charver walk 'head down ... with an arched back' was a sign of acting 'hard', and provided evidence of their subhuman, animalistic tendencies. The 'ape-like' walk was also parodied in other discussions and came to symbolise the stunted evolution of Charver youth.

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<sup>139</sup> While some respondents referred to Charver as a style that existed in other areas too, there was nearly always a focus on the inner-city.

While the postures of Charver Kids may have been pronounced, their vocal intonation also marked them out from other youth groups. It is difficult to express this in the written word, as the accents can only be interpreted by those familiar with the nuances of the region's distinctive, lilting dialect.

Sam: It's jus' like everyone goes round in big groups going, 'Ooooh trennnnndy' in deep voices.

James: 'Yaaaaar mon'.

[...]

Nicola: Yeah, they go, [*with emphasis*] 'Howay then ya little Charver' [...] They come up to you and say, [*sing-song intonation*] 'What-d'ya-think-ya-lookin'-at?'



Fig. 3.6 Cultural representation of charver life: 8 Ace VIZ's Thirsty Family Man (VIZ 88 p42)

Charvers were believed to live with parents who held lax attitudes regarding drugs, crime and under-age drinking (see fig. 3.6). The discourse of 'bad mothers' and 'single mothers' became a means of transforming West End women into scapegoats, the undisciplined rearers of society's criminal fraternity (Campbell, 1993). As in many British metropolitan districts, single-headed households are common: the last 1991 census records over one in four families in Tyneside headed by lone parents.

Whereas the Real Geordies were predominately an all-male collective, Charver Kids could include young men and women who had become attuned to the rebellious street styles of the West End. They were regarded as the scourge of the city, the primary perpetrators of street crime. Nicola identified as a Charver and was known by the school to have a mother who was liable to become abusive to teachers, and a father who had 'done time'. Like other Charvers in the school, she was thought to have a large number of relatives, many of whom were alleged criminal associates. Even in school, where uniform was essential, Nicola could clearly be detected as a feisty Charver Kid. I asked Michelle about feminine Charver styles in school and she bluntly retorted, 'Bleached blond hair like Nicky. Short skirts like Nicky's. Charver fringe, like Nicky's'.

Elsewhere, Filo who was a Real Geordie, told me about a young woman he'd had a dispute with on the way into school: 'She was propa Charver girl. Y'kna, real fuckin' thick arms t'brey ye!' [hit you]. Charver girls were frequently derided as 'scrubbers', a term which suggested sexual looseness and a sense that they were unclean. This terminology draws upon the earlier portrayal of washerwomen, dustwomen and female sweat-shop workers visited in the Chapter 1. With their pineapple ponytails, heavy jewellery, trainers and tracksuit-tops, these girls were negotiating new, urban femininities that made a mockery of the image of the feminine passive wallflower. Charver girls were loud, street-wise and capable of sticking up for themselves. If the existing local discourses were to be believed, they were hardened smokers, adept shop-lifters and thought to have a greater propensity for 'falling' pregnant at an early age. Furthermore, Charver children had the poorest school attendance rates and as a consequence of social deprivation were the qualified recipients of 'free dinners'.

The Charver Kid remains a discursive construction composed of an amalgam of fears attributed to the new English urban underclass. In this way the language ascribed to Charvers took on a form that elaborated the broader vocabulary of racism. Thus, it is not simply what Charver Kids say and do that is of consequence but equally what is

said about them and how their actions are reported and made sense of within the matrices of race, class and youth. The depictions of desperate West End families with 'snotty-nosed', screaming kids can be seen as part of an older discourse of whiteness that viewed working-class folk as teeming, unclean *hordes*. Other students made disparaging remarks about some of these urban children, referring to the poor quality of their clothes and the fact that they were 'dirty'. Indeed, certain Charver Kids were singled out by their peers as carriers of infestation and were said to have nits, fleas and be generally 'scabby'. These students also pointed to some of the most unpopular Charver Kids and identified them as 'soap dodgers', claiming they were spotty and had bad body odour.

Similarly, there is a longstanding racialised discourse of disease that has equated ethnic minority groups with lack of hygiene, bad smells and disease<sup>140</sup>. An early primary contributor to this debate in the mid-1960s includes *The Times* which in a series of inflammatory articles entitled 'The Dark Millions' wrote extensively about the connections between immigration, tuberculosis and the spread of venereal diseases (see Gilroy, 1995:84). While poor social conditions and a lack of amenities may have contributed to historical representations of black and working class peoples as 'filthy', what was culturally ascribed to these people remained central. At a subcultural level, gradations of whiteness were clearly in place. It was through these metaphors that the Real Geordies could romantically construe themselves as 'the salt of the earth' in a bold show of their imaginary skilled, labouring credentials. In contrast, Charver Kids, on account of urban housing conditions and long-term familial unemployment were its sullied flip-side, often described to me as 'the scum of the earth' or 'a blot on the landscape'. In short, the Charvers were the modern day urban primitives: their cleanliness and by proxy their whiteness had been called into question and they had been found wanting. We will now turn our attention to the subcultural style of Charver Kids in order to explore the racialised embodiment of a lower working-class identity.

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<sup>140</sup> Readers may recall how this rhetorical device was a perpetual feature in the accounts of the Kempton Dene Skins in Chapter 3 who claimed, 'pakis stink', 'pakis smell' and 'pakis stink of shit!'.

*'White trash': Charver style and the construction of an urban underclass*

The Nineties has given rise to a new social class stereotype which has depicted lower working-class groups as people with large families, satellite TV and pebble-dash terraced housing. Onslow, in the sitcom *Keeping Up Appearances*, '8 Ace' in *Viz* and Harry Enfield's portrayal of Wayne and Waynetta Slob are all archetypes of this now identifiable lower working-class strata. In the haughty condemnation of 'single mothers', 'absent fathers' and bricked up Capris in estates, an accompanying accessory for moral rebuke has been the shellsuit or tracksuit, itself an imagined index of a lower-class 'bad taste' mentality. When it came to dress codes, brightly coloured tracksuits were the favoured apparel of Charver Kids (including brands such as Kappa, Morgan or Adidas), worn with trainers and various sports accessories. However, this attire, as a working-class youth style, has further meanings in Tyneside's interior, urban heartlands.

Sally Westwood (1990) in her study of inner-city black British masculinities, has suggested that this dress style is no random costume, but is indicative of the micro-politics of the street. As such the dress conveys male sporting prowess, and doubles as the ideal clothing for a sharp get away from the police and other urban aggressors. Westwood recalls how, 'Tracksuits and trainers were not just the whims of fashion, they express something about the nature of street life and the importance of physical fitness' (1990:65). Campbell similarly reflects how, 'The poor have claimed for themselves the gear associated with striding, racing, jumping, climbing ... It is also about being hard, being survivalists in a brutalized, gendered, conservative culture ...' (1993:273). The dress styles of the streetwise Charvers should be read within this stylistic framework. Like black youth, this lower working-class group were represented as 'gangstas', 'rogues', 'apes', society's evolutionary 'missing link' in the chain of human order.

That Charver clothes were not dissimilar from the styles sported by many metropolitan black youth in other British cities, only served to further devalue the group's whiteness. The chunky trainers, garish track-suits and peroxide hair set

Charver Kids apart and provided stark contrast with the understated Real Geordies. It was a style that was open to ridicule:

Michelle: They wear like Kappa.

James: I hate them.

Michelle: Adidas pants and Fila.

Sara: And big chunky trainers!

Charvers were also reputed to favour fake bronze tans achieved through visits to ultra-violet sun-beds and said to wear chunky jewellery including gold chains, heavy rings, ear-rings (worn by both sexes) and the occasional name-engraved bracelet. However, it was the Charver fringe that was particularly distinctive.

*Anoop: Are the Charvers lads or girls?*

Sam: Both. They all wear Kappa.

Nicola: They boys do charver their fringe, actually.

[...]

Sam: Aal the Charvers have a skinhead aal the way round, and they shave it with just the fringe left.

The Charver fringe hairstyle referred to was a peroxide, bleached-blond look that could be added to the front end of the hair-line or dyed all over. The overall appearance - fake tan, heavy jewellery, bleached hair - was interpreted by other youth as a signifier of 'bad taste' and lower-class credentials. And yet in boldly displaying their subcultural style the Charvers were also overturning the negative inferences. In short their stylistic activities were a celebratory statement of their underclass identity.

Charver Kids such as Nicola resisted the assertion that the dress style concealed a lower working-class stupidity and was associated with street louts.

Michelle: They're all clueless, wearing these baggy pants.

Nicola: Don't say 'clueless'.

[...]

Michelle: They hang round shops and cars.

Nicola: We don't.

In the wake of the 1991 uprisings in Tyneside, children, the very individuals who were said to need protection from crime, were assigned a new role as some of its worst perpetrators (Collier, 1998). More disconcertingly, this 'moral panic' centred not just on adolescents, the typical targets of social outrage, but on children below the age of ten<sup>141</sup>. In the North East, Charver Kids became synonymous with a spate of uncontrollable neighbourhood 'crime sprees' especially related to motor vehicles including joy-riding, TWOCing (Taking Without Owners Consent) and ram-raiding - activities discussed at length in Bea Campbell's (1993) explosive account, *Goliath*. A recurring motif which came to epitomise the Charver Kid in television and press-reportage was the figure of 'Rat Boy', 'a monster figure straight out of the steamy New York tenement blocks' (*The Sunday Times*, 28/2/93). In a detailed case study of the Rat Boy phenomenon, Richard Collier (1998) has recently considered the discursive construction of youthful, lower working-class masculinities through these hate figures. He explains, 'The Rat Boy was so named because of the habit he had developed of hiding in a maze of ventilation shafts, tunnels and roof spaces in the Byker Wall Estate in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, England, while trying to evade capture by the police' (p.92). As Collier's criminology research reveals, the Rat Boy was constructed as 'something very "UnBritish", once alien but now increasingly

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<sup>141</sup> Nation-wide fears concerning childhood symbolically crystallised around the murder of two-year-old James Bulger by 2 ten-year-old boys, Robert Thompson and Jon Venebles in Liverpool, 1993. As Blake Morrison (1997) has argued, this event more than any other came to signal the 'death' of childhood.

familiar' (p.92). However, the depiction of poverty-stricken peoples through animalistic discourses associated with vermin is not in itself new as we saw earlier. In particular we may consider C.F.G. Masterman's comments in Chapter 1 in which he compares the emergence of impoverished people in the urban environment to a plague of rats. In this sense Rat Boy was the epitome of the lawless Charver Kid, a monstrous alien 'Other' (half rat, half boy) who could be said to embody the long-standing horror associated with the lower orders of over-breeding, vermin and the spread of plague<sup>142</sup>.

Moreover, the meaning of Charver is particular to the West End district of Tyneside, and as such constitutes a specific urban meaning<sup>143</sup>. The term is also used to depict something that is no good, an abbreviation for rubbish in 'Geordie' colloquialism (e.g. 'It's complete Chaver mon!'). Of course, another word for rubbish is the Americanism, 'trash', further compounding the association of Charver as 'white trash'. As rats reside amidst trash and rubbish dumps, the discursive connections between Charvers, Rat Boys, poverty and a tainted whiteness can come together. That the Charvers were 'blackened' as a result of their inner-city location was also significant, indeed, popular discourses constructed Charvers as a retarded race with deep voices, hunched statures and aggressive, unpredictable attitudes. As a symbol of lower-class urban decline, the Charvers embodied the fears of a community: effectively they are Britain's equivalent to 'white trash'. Like the infamous Rat Boy, this degeneration was written on Charver bodies and felt to be intelligible to those who could read this corporeal schema. Their supposed body statures and immediate association with car-theft and crime made Charvers the perfect receptacle for pseudo-scientific claims of a lawless, working-class body that had ultimately regressed in the squalid recess of the inner-city. It was this English urban interior that had helped spawn the particular subcultural styles of the Charvers.

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<sup>142</sup> In the English imagination rats have long been associated with urban squalor (despite their mainly rural habitation) and foreign disease (for example the Bubonic Plague, appropriately termed the Black Death).

<sup>143</sup> Towards the end of the research the term had begun to accrue a wider definition that extended beyond the West End. It is possible that the 'white riots' of 1991 may have encouraged a narrower representation of Charver.



The excessive style of Charvers spilled over from fabrics to music. Charver Kids favoured Rave and Jungle music, sounds that were historically tied to the mutating patterns of cultural syncretism formed in British inner cities. I enquired about these musical preferences:

Sam: Ahh, they jus' like Rave.

Michelle: They just go around like in the car with the music pounding, the kinda stuff I like. The kinda stuff me and Nicky like.

James: Like some Americans who carry ghetto-blasters.

The musical disposition of the Charvers, like their clothing, can be seen as related to the urban environment<sup>144</sup>. Charvers were partial to the thumping, industrial techno tunes that have emerged in Britain's post-industrial cities. Rave music is comprised of exhilarating high-speed beats, pounding bass lines and repetitive syncopated loops, a synthesis that is ideal for the hi-energy performance of car and driver. The music draws closely on the contemporary urban environment of 'white noise' using samples from car alarms, push-button telephones, police sirens, breaking glass, barking dogs, computer video games etc. Throughout discussions with Charver Kids, Rave and Jungle music were an important part of the 'doing' of ethnicity through subculture. They spoke to me about parties and musical events they had attended and played several tracks for me to listen to<sup>145</sup>. Essentially, Jungle is the product of Britain's inner cities and, as the music producer Chris Simon explains, it has particular meaning in these social environments.

Jungle is our street sound. Just as hip hop became the sound of America's streets, jungle will take hold in every British city that's fucked up. That's why no one in the media wanted to touch it. It's a

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<sup>144</sup> Similarly the social historian Eric Hobsbawm (1968:91) has noted that the period of industrialisation in the 1840s 'mark the end of the era when folksong remained the major musical idiom of industrial workers'.

<sup>145</sup> Charver Kids had come to realise that I had knowledge of certain forms of house music (especially Acid and early nineties techno) and would pick my brains on historical details relating to artists, labels and seminal tracks.

street thing. It's about enjoyment for people who might not have much to go for in life (*Face*, 1994:95).

The emphasis on street culture, accompanied by the blocked opportunities that prevail for Charver Kids, encouraged Jungle to become adopted as a positive mode of identification.

Moreover, Tyneside Charvers appear to have embraced Jungle music with as much enthusiasm as the inner city black British communities residing in London, Birmingham, Bristol and Manchester. However, in the absence of a proportionate African-Caribbean community, there was little evidence to suggest that Tyneside's urban underclass had made any firm links to black cultural experience. Rather, they claimed Jungle music for themselves as 'Charver style'. Jungle is essentially a mix of the heavy bass and toastin' aspects associated with reggae, set to the speed and technological soundscapes of Rave music<sup>146</sup>. The new production sound has spawned a series of hybrid, interrelated offshoots including Jungle, drum 'n' bass and ragga. The term 'ragga' itself derives from the older phrase 'ragamuffin', a word used to describe scruffy, dirty people in rags, and so once again has a social immediacy for the poverty-stricken, not-quite-white identities of Charver Kids. Comparisons with other terms of lower working-class rebuke can further be made, such as 'Scals' (from Scallywags and Rascallions) and 'Hooligans' (a racialised phrase arising from a notorious working class Irish family called the Houlihans).

Yet there are further interconnections between race, class and the inner city, as we have already seen. As a metaphor, the term 'Jungle' remains of interest to our notions of whiteness, having originally been a Sanskrit word appropriated by nineteenth-century colonial administrators. Phil Cohen explains: 'Subsequently it was brought home and applied to the "dark continents" of the working-class city. Urban jungles, concrete jungles, even blackboard jungles, where mobs of youth rampaged, and

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<sup>146</sup> The outdated term 'Rave' is an oversimplification of the hybrid sub-genres of house music, but will be used here for its shorthand recognisability.

decent citizens feared to tread ...' (1993:80). A number of parallels were drawn between the jungle and inner-city life through social Darwinian concepts such as the 'law of the jungle', 'survival of the fittest' and the overall ability to 'adapt' to a prevailing urban environment. As we have seen in Chapter 1, British cities have been constructed through racialised discourses as dark, dangerous jungles. The jungle reference, then, combines the colonial appropriation of imaginary racial origins with the fear of urban, industrial unrest and the unruly working-classes. As an interior territory, the West End represents a 'concrete Jungle', a modern day repository for the horrors which Joseph Conrad (1902) first encountered in the African heartland. As successive generations of migrant settlers develop their own lifestyles and infrastructures in Britain's run down urban quarters, places like the West End may have become modern day equivalents for a new 'heart of darkness'. Moreover, many West End places have themselves been given colloquial epithets such as 'Twilight Elswick' and 'Darkest Benwell'<sup>147</sup>.

There was, then, a powerful imperial geography that was used to depict the industrial inner cities and the people who resided there. The tendency to associate Britain's urban zones with dense clusters of foreigners has been such that Coates and Silburn entitled their study of Nottingham, *Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen* (1973[1970]), as if Englishness and social deprivation were mutually exclusive. The contemporary descriptions of Charvers would certainly suggest that notions of an English underclass and the urban dispossessed remain with us today. Ultimately, lower working-class culture and the 'sound of the city' served as an umbilical cord uniting Charver Kids unmistakably with the metropolis, and inadvertently with a mythologised black populace. However, there was little evidence to suggest that Charver Kids had established close bonds with minority ethnic communities in the city. Some of these youth felt little hesitation in referring to 'the paki shop', for example, while others mentioned racist altercations with members from Asian communities. Moreover, as we will go on to find in a later section, Charver Kids produced their own urban

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<sup>147</sup> That houses may still be purchased in places like Benwell for below five thousand pounds reflects the disregard with which these alien communities are viewed.

legends concerning ideas of race and ethnicity. Having discussed the subcultural style of Charvers and related this to popular representations of race and class, we will now consider how poverty and city living have further tainted their whiteness.

### *Slum monkeys in the urban interior*

Although subcultural theorists have explored, in great detail, the symbolic styles and practices of youth, much of this work has remained geographically unspecified. For example, we know far more about the symbols, music and dress codes of Punks than we do about the suburban preserves that spawned their angry style. As we saw in Chapter 5, images of suburbia and the countryside can be powerful templates on which to inscribe the signature of whiteness and nationhood. Simon Jones (1988) rightly drew attention to the fact that the white Rastafarians he encountered were, above all, the unique product of a close multiracial upbringing in the Balsall Heath, inner-city zone of Birmingham. We have already seen the importance of regionalism for the Real Geordies and will now discuss the unusual relationship Charver subculture has to its urban origins.

The West End district of Tyneside has elsewhere been identified as one of Britain's 'dangerous places' (Campbell, 1993). Certain comparisons can be drawn between perceptions of Tyneside's West End and London's East End. In Chapter 1 we saw how the East End sector of London was historically regarded as strongly working class, multi-ethnic and dangerous. In the ostensibly white city of Newcastle upon Tyne the West End district conjures up similar images to those inspired by the nineteenth century urban explorers of East End London. When thinking about the way the West End was portrayed, I found Edward Said's (1995[1979]) interrogation of the concept of 'Orientalism' a meaningful term with which to 'make sense' of the discourses that surround this particular urban quarter. 'Orientalism', a hegemonic Western discourse has been successfully deployed to identify the 'Orient' as Other and in so doing has allowed the West to construct its own sense of identity as separate. Thus, it was through the invention of the 'Orient' that the West (what Said calls the 'Occident') was able to distinguish itself. However, for Said the 'Orient' is

subject to an 'imagined geography', an assemblage of the tissues and fragments of Western imperial fantasy<sup>148</sup>. Like the 'Orient', Tyneside's multi-ethnic West End can be viewed as a 'silent Other', defined by those living outside the conurbation who project their hatred of blackness and poverty onto the interior locality, and so constitute their own neighbourhoods as superior white hinterlands. However, the process of globalisation and the diasporic movements of people have seen the 'exotic' come to represent something that is no longer 'out there', but now pressed up under the noses of the former colonisers. In turn 'white flight' from the cities has been a defensive response to the changing British urban landscape.

The dangerous but exotic sense of the West End district as Other is further compounded in comparisons with the war-torn Middle East. Thus, Beatrix Campbell (1995) has likened the West End to 'Britain's Little Beirut', a foreign zone complete with rampaging street Arabs, who form the outer-skin of this projection. As an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1984) the West End remains peripheral, out of reach, yet at once intriguingly unknowable outside the prevailing 'Orientalist' discourses, which constitute it as Other. In this reading the Charvers come to make up the foreign bodies that constitute the internal colonial Other. As such, the geographic location of Charver Kids within the imagined West End is an effective depreciation on their immediate claims to whiteness. The late-Victorian and Edwardian observers I drew upon earlier would no doubt have represented Charver Kids as society's 'street Arabs'. This racialised concept was deployed to depict children who attended 'Ragged Schools', institutions offering free education for youngsters from the poorest classes. Consequently, Charver Kids who received free school meals and state subsidies came to form part of the nation's modern urban underclass. They represented the darkened underclass, the new urban primitives of contemporary society.

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<sup>148</sup> This fictional representation of the West End frequently fails to mention that the district also contains an internal geography that includes an East End province, for example, within the overall interior landscape.

The central parts to the West of the city contain areas that are run-down and dilapidated, what one taxi-driver referred to as a 'Shanty Town'. Such discursive terms reveal how fears concerning working class violence and racialised danger can be doubly evoked by white suburban dwellers. Indeed, a recurring theme in the ethnographic data concerning Charvers and the West End was the ways in which discourses of race and class could overlap with one another. We may also recall how the term Charver could on occasion be substituted for the phrase 'Charwallah' in an attempt to make a lower class and ethnic distinction between white youth groups. Other social commentators have alluded to this historical portrayal of British cities, and refer to how the Victorians deployed a crude Social Darwinism to racially encode working-class urban dwellers as 'slum monkeys' (Chambers 1988[1986]:26). Once again, the epithets evoke ideas of an urban jungle with marauding Rat Boys, Charvers, ragamuffin children, apes, charwallahs, street Arabs, rogues and other semi-evolved mutations. The animalistic portrayal of an urban residuum as 'slum monkeys' or its modern day equivalent 'Rat Boys', says much about the repressed fears of contemporary white, bourgeois, suburban culture. Richard Collier explains how these corporeal fears are displaced onto working-class landscapes and bodies.

The working-class city itself has, of course, like the working-class body, long been seen as a site of fear, desire, disgust and fascination from the perspective of the middle-class gaze. In a sense, the Rat Boy embodied some familiar fantasies around the corporeality of working-class urban poor. In contrast to 'cleaned up', fed and educated bourgeois children, proletariat youth appear as 'savage', their undisciplined bodies to be censured, disciplined and controlled, their very presence a 'plague' on the respectable streets (1998:93).

The criminalistic and sub-human representations used to depict Charver Kids were a familiar discursive trope deployed by young people, adults and press alike. The reference to 'savagery', 'apes' and 'slum monkeys' also hints at the underlying and connected racialisation of these portrayals. Such descriptions were previously found to have emerged from a broad range of late-Victorian and Edwardian historiography.

A contemporary example of this former articulation occurred when I asked some of the Real Geordies if they would be attending the Hoppings (an annual open-air fair on the Town Moor, alleged to be the largest in Europe). While they maintained that the event was a source of excitement ('Aye, they'll be loadsa lasses gannin!') they also implied it was a place of danger, colonised by large groups of Charver Kids looking to harass and steal money ('It's Charver country'). The Real Geordies went on to joke that the Hoppings was full of 'gypos' (Gypsies), a term that was ascribed to fair-ground workers and Charvers alike. This phrase had negative race/class connotations related to poverty and a Romany heritage that further embellished the not-quite-white status of these social groups. Thus, the term 'Chavvy' is used in other English locales to denote children from traveling backgrounds and has similar negative associations<sup>149</sup>. Ultimately the Charver Kids were framed by a strikingly similar discourse to that attributed by bourgeois nineteenth century writers of the urban poor. The sullied whiteness of the early industrial underclass in corporeal representations encouraged these bodies to be seen as dangerous and degenerate, this discourse would now appear to utilise the same tropes when depicting Charver Kids. Thus, the West End of Tyneside and its residents are portrayed in a near-identical manner to those in the East End part of London at the turn of the century: both were the retarded, not-quite-white of their social class milieu. In the final instance, then, the Charvers were 'slum monkeys' in the urban jungle.

### *Racial geographies and urban mythologies*

Although widespread criminal activities may appear to indicate that 'moral panics' concerning Charver Kids are well merited, this would not account for the broader geographic context within which the subculture resided. The worst areas of nationally recorded crime in 1991 showed the county of Northumbria (4,360) top the table in England and Wales, followed by Cleveland (4,271) and then Greater Manchester (4,001)<sup>150</sup>. Within Northumbria the West End quarter of Tyneside had the highest

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<sup>149</sup> For example an item of clothing may be described as 'Chavvy' meaning that it is a cheap, poor quality item that has been bought at a market.

<sup>150</sup> Source, Labour Party (1992:7); figures relate to offences per 100,000 population.

local level of crime, yet the area also has the highest unemployment rate in the city. Moreover the unemployment level of young men had witnessed a fourfold increase from 1986-1991. Such geographic, social and economic factors undeniably shaped the social practices of Charver Kids. Residents of the West End know only too well that insurance companies will not offer their support to these civic dwellers deemed 'untouchable'. The riots that spread through the district in 1991 received national coverage and have been extensively discussed by Campbell (1993). I do not wish to retread this ground. However, it seemed that young people who lived in the West End had their own experiences of either witnessing or being involved in burglaries, theft, drug-taking or 'joy-riding', incidents which they recounted. Many of these activities were viewed as 'beyond the pale' of accepted behaviour by the majority of students, and so compounded Charver status as inhuman, far from innocent, not-quite-white.

The distinction between a 'respectable' and a 'rough' working class is not a new phenomenon. Previously a considerable amount of historical evidence has demonstrated that urban residents in the West End of London were thought to be physically and morally superior to their counterparts in the East End of the city. Particular groups could be defined by their social class geography (e.g. Cockneys) or by their subcultural attachment (e.g. Teddy boys, Punks) as a 'race apart'. Similarly, Charver Kids on account of being impoverished urban citizens *and* having formed a subculture of their own were perceived as 'Other'. That Tyneside's West End was synonymous with Charvers symptomatically implied that these urban dwellers were a race apart. As we have already seen this perception was given credence by the suggestion that Charver Kids walked, spoke, dressed and behaved in a manner altogether different to other 'Geordie' youth. Overall then, it is British working-class youth that have most noticeably found their white credentials called into question as 'moral panics' related to crime and deviancy have spread.

More recently, the image of the West End as a 'no-go' area of uncontrollable crime has subsided in the face of an organic community politics that is testament to the strength of the people in these neighbourhoods. Campbell (1993) has documented the



pivotal role played, especially by women, in community-building exercises within impoverished estates, concentrating her account of the city's spatial dynamics firmly within the field of gender relations. While there can be no denying the gendered formation of criminal activity in urban spaces, Charver accounts seemed to suggest that certain girls were also involved in an audacious, intricate waltz with the law. Far from being shocking, these events broke up the humdrum boredom of 'doing nothing' (Corrigan, 1981) and were even regarded as 'dead funny'.

Nicola: There's this girl by wor's, she's thirteen years and she drives her Dad's car. And she was driving roon the corner and she couldna' see o'er the steering wheel and she went smack bang into a bizzy [police] car. It wa' dead funny!

*Anoop: You were watching this?*

Nicola: Yeah. We wa gannin' ta go in wi' her, but we wa' on the kerb just watching her. She got done for stealing the car.

As we have seen, Charver girls did not necessarily nurse community relations. Furthermore, shortly after interviews were conducted, Nicola (12 years) a self-identified Charver, went missing from home for over week without contact. She had disappeared on another occasion but had turned up after a couple of days. Eventually she was found with a young man in his twenties in Blyth, an outer-city estate with a high level of social deprivation and drug taking. Teachers identified Charver girls such as Nicola as the one's most likely to become pregnant, and Charver boys as invariably the ones most likely to get sent to prison. Noticeably, Nicky's West End experiences appeared in marked contrast with other young people who lived in suburban quarters. Here, she performs her Charver identity in front of myself and her school friends:

[11-12 years]

Nicola: If you don't smoke and drink and other things you can't be in a gang.

James: Do you smoke?

Nicola: I smoke and drink<sup>151</sup>. If you wanna be in the gang you've gotta smoke, drink, etc. If I say, 'Mam go and get us a drink' she goes and gets it.

Michelle: My Mam wouldn't dare.

In this extract Nicky discursively places herself as a Charver. Her experience, like that of other Charver Kids, is located the working-class landscape of most student childhood's. Rather like the eight-year-old watercress street-vendor Henry Mayhew encountered in the East End of London in 1851, Charver Kids blurred the boundaries between childhood and adult status. They told tales of staying out late until the early hours of the morning and appeared to have first-hand experience of drug use and alcohol consumption from an early age. At the same time, their experiences included taking on some 'adult' responsibilities. Charver girls were particularly called upon to take care of 'bairnes' and 'little'uns', and were sometimes responsible for organising domestic chores, conducting shopping errands and occasionally helping out with the cooking. Teenage-pregnancy also offered an early transition into motherhood and adult status. These experiences appeared outside the terrain of most other young people's experience of childhood, and served to demonstrate the double-edged nature of the liberties taken. At the same time those who did not identify as Charver remained cautious of these formidable West End youth and their 'gangsta' reputations.

*Anoop: What's it mean if you're a Charver?*

Michelle: It means you're from the West End and you're a rogue.

[...]

Sam: My brother got jumped on by a load of Charvers outside the Regency Centre. These twelve kids jumped on him and kicked him in the mouth, he's got a big lip out here.

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<sup>151</sup> The behaviour records showed that Nicola had been caught with cigarettes and a lighter in school. Moreover, it was widely recognised that Charver Kids and their families preferred to purchase alcohol from off-licenses to avoid the expense of city centre drinking.

Tales of Charver violence were common amongst young people. The 'rogue' identities inhabited by the not-quite-white Charvers meant they were labelled as trouble makers simply for 'hanging around' and having a visible street presence (Corrigan, 1981). In popular discourse, the Charver Kids were street urchins who were closely associated with the dangers thought to be inherent in Tyneside's West End. The extent to which Charvers were read as 'rogues' or 'gangstas' on the basis of their apparel meant that Charver style was in turn regarded as emblematic of their lowly 'white trash' status.

As we have seen, there were a number of historically embedded urban myths about working-class life that have retained a contemporary significance. Alongside the common myths described, which equated Charvers with dirt and animals, ran other emphatically racialised legends. Throughout these narratives, the myth of a 'hard' black man was a familiar refrain. For example, I was informed about the existence of a black man with massive hands and long fingers who dressed in pure white and owned a gleaming Rolls Royce of the same pristine shade. He was said to live in Blyth and that everyone knew him as 'Derek the Darkie'. Although I have recently been able to confirm elements of this narrative<sup>152</sup> the excessive details of the story function to Other the black character concerned (the 'massive' hands, long fingers, the claim that he was known 'by everyone', the white suit and gleaming, mint-white Roller). Amongst students I interviewed, these excessive qualities came to be embodied in the concept of the 'hard' black man. While such urban folklore was not the prerogative of Charver Kids their street-based culture meant they were particularly susceptible to the production of racialised narratives as many resided in the multi-ethnic West End. James, who was at times identified as a Charver Kid<sup>153</sup>, utilised the myth of the 'hard' black man:

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<sup>152</sup> Corroborative evidence from Blyth locals confirmed that a man of African descent who had at one time owned a large car lived in the area. He was said to be well liked by the community and described as an 'eccentric'.

<sup>153</sup> The discursive positioning of subcultural identities was seen when certain youth self-identified themselves with youthful collectivities in one instance and then not in the next. This implies that experiences of subcultural affiliation may be more contingent and partial than has been previously imagined.

James: My friend was walking along the toon and this big paki kid goes, 'Crappa Kappa' cos [my friend] had a Kappa tracksuit on. He kept goin', 'That Kappa's a snide [fake] cos it's crappa Kappa' cos it had a rip under the arm.

Anoop: *Who was saying this?*<sup>154</sup>

James: This big paki kid. [...]

He walked past him, grabbed him and said, 'Eeeh, that Kappa top's fake, all the things are blurry and that'. But it wasn't fake, it was real and he was goin' 'I hate the crappa Kappa tops'.

The image of a 'big paki' or a 'hard black man' has resonance within youth culture as we previously found with the Skinheads and will later be exemplified in a subcultural study of the B-Boyz (Chapter 9). The significance of clothing within youth cultures is also evident. Calling someone's items a 'snide' was a means of questioning another's masculine status and credentials. If the Kappa is 'Crappa' then so too is the wearer. Notwithstanding, Charver Kids could evoke urban legends that concerned curious ethnic rituals. For example, they noted how black coloured BMW cars would be termed 'Black Man's Willy' in a peculiar, colloquial re-working of the initials. This phrase drew upon popular urban folklore about Jamaican drug barons who chose to drive black BMWs. It was difficult to ascertain how meaningful these 'Northern myths' (Tailor *et.al.* 1996:28) were, though their very production suggested much about the not-quite-white portrayal of Charver subculture, as we shall find below. Once again, the concept of an imaginary 'hard black man' was espoused.

James: There's this thing called 'The Black Man's Convention' and you've gotta fight this dead hard black man to get in. Ya kna, you walk round pretending to be Charvers and that.

Anoop: *What do you mean, 'The Black Man's Convention'?*

Nicola: *[laughs]*

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<sup>154</sup> I purposefully repeated this question to James, a Charver Kid, as his use of the phrase 'paki' remained part of an unflinching rhetoric that he felt unselfconscious in expressing in front of me.

James: Just like a gang. A gang called, 'The Black Man's Convention'. Loads of people all acting dead hard, they've gotta fight this big black person to be in 'The Black Man's Convention'

Nicola: And other things they've gotta do - [*pointedly*] especially if you're a woman.

*Anoop: Have you got to be black to be in it?*

Nicola: No.

James: No.

According to the respondents 'The Black Man's Convention' was a crack, criminal unit comprised of 'hard' Charver types with established reputations for fighting and TWOCing. Despite its name, the outfit was said to contain white women and men who had passed certain tests. It was implied that these tests were sexual ones for women and aggressive, fighting ones for men. As such, Charver women and men were being asked to prove their 'blackness' through codes of sexuality and violence. For 'hard' Charver males, entry into 'The Black Man's Convention' was said to involve the ability to defeat a black Other in a fighting contest.

*Anoop: What you were saying last time about 'The Black Man's Convention' is that true?*

James: The 'Black Man's Convention'? It's true you've gotta fight the hardest black man.

*Anoop: But does it really exist?*

James: Yeah, it properly exists.

*Anoop: How do you know?*

Sam: Cos they go round in cars, about fifty cars.

James: Aye, I kna, wheel spinning their cars and everythin'.

*Anoop: What do they do?*

Sam: They go round lookin' for people to chin [i.e. punch in the mouth].

James: They go round fightin' everyone, cos you've gotta fight this black man all the time to get in 'The Black Man's Convention'. Yer gotta be dead hard to be in it, they jus' go round chinnin' people and everythin'.

In this extract, the mental image of a 'hard black man' was the defining Other which Charvers had to negotiate. Proof of their own 'hardness' was provided in evidence that they truly were not-quite-white if they could successfully 'chin' and tame the primitive black man. This would allow them to inhabit the prestigious status of a 'hard' black masculinity and develop mannerisms of black speech, posture and gait with less obvious contradiction. In essence, the Charvers could viably behave as subhuman, because they were not really white. However like Irish US immigrants who had used the performance of blackface to ridicule Southern American negroes (Ignatiev, 1995), and in turn assert their own white credentials, the Charvers can be seen to invoke an imaginary set of ethnic rituals without ever being deemed black. Truly they may have been not-quite-white, but this did not mean all pretensions to whiteness were forgone. The 'tacky' bleached fringe functioned as a symbolic reminder that a semblance whiteness could yet be bought at a price. Thus, it would appear that despite the relative absence of black people from the public landscape of Tyneside, their presence looms large in the white imaginary.

### *Charvers and the making of a not-quite-white ethnicity*

While many contemporary writers are in danger of viewing the working-classes as a homogeneous entity, writers such as Charles Booth in his encyclopaedic reports displayed an early sensitivity to the numerous sub-divisions that exist within this social category. Richard Hoggart (1966[1957]) encapsulates this internal variety when he reminds us of 'the great number of differences, the subtle shades, the class distinctions, within the working-classes themselves' (p.21). It was these 'subtle shades' that effectively produced Charver Kids as Tyneside's not-quite-white in schooling and neighbourhood discourses. This distinction between 'ordinary' white Tyneside dwellers (working- and middle-class) and inner city West End Charvers,

was apparent in dusky descriptions of the latter as a ‘blot on the landscape’, ‘an alien breed’, a ‘cancer’, ‘dirt’, ‘filth’ and as one student memorably added, ‘scum’. In short, the Charvers can never be Real Geordies, distinguished carriers of an archetypal industrial whiteness; somehow they were altogether ‘unclean’. As we will see Charvers were at the centre of a curious *triangulation* of circumstances that meant they were placed at the borders of whiteness.

Firstly, Charver Kids were undeniably impoverished. They were the recipients of free meals and had ‘tatty’ uniforms and a reputation for an unkempt look. Although Charver Kids were not unusual in being eligible for free meals at school, specifically, they were thought to occupy the lowest strata of working-class life. Moreover, Charver parents were seen as state ‘spongers’ who purposely had large families in what was regarded as both an expression of their unrestrained sexual libido and a calculated attempt to claim extra child benefits. By exploring the discursive construction of Charver Kids in media reports of the Rat Boy and popular configurations of young people, we are able to catch a glimpse of intra-ethnic differentiation. The subcultural values attributed to Charver style are indicative of the racialisation of a lower-working class corpus as dirt-ridden, smelly and ragged. Secondly, Charvers resided in and around the inner city, in places such as Elswick, Scotswood, Benwell, Cowgate and Fenham. This urban location is significant, for Britain’s metropolitan districts have long been racialised against the pastoral whiteness of the suburbs, as we discovered in the accounts of industrial commentators discussed in Chapter 1 and the rural writers drawn upon in Chapter 5. Moreover, the subcultural style adopted by the Charvers was itself a mediation of contemporary urban form expressed in the dress style, haircut, accent, body posture and musical preferences. Ultimately, the Charvers were treated as urban untouchables, families who had colonised this zone of the city and made it their own.

A third circumstance which threatened Charver claims to whiteness was that they resided in the same locality as the city’s main, non-white ethnic minority populace, South Asians (see Chapter 6). By dint of inhabiting the same social space, using the

same public facilities, breathing the same polluted air, Charver claims to whiteness were all the more precarious. Unlike other more mobile working-class factions, Charver families had not made the magical leap required for a 'white flight' to the suburbs. Worse still, the reputations of Charver Kids were 'blackened' by their associations with urban crime and disorder. Where previously inner-city crime had taken on a racialised form that branded black male youth as 'muggers' (Hall, 1978) the contemporary violations of joy-riding, TWOCCing, ram-raiding, car and house theft were immediately viewed as 'Charver crimes'. In this way, the identity of the TWOCCer was synonymous with the Charver, yet both were discursive constructions of impoverished white male youth. Ultimately, it was a combination of factors - geography, poverty and migration - which led to the establishment of Charvers as 'tainted' whites, twilight residents of Tyneside's urban, shadowy recesses.

## **Conclusion**

In this third sequence from a quartet of Tyneside chapters we illustrated the intra-discursive class construction of whiteness by discussing the social situation of two youth subcultures. The research demonstrated the significance of intra-class relations in the contemporary English context and revealed the perseverance of distinct working-class cultures. Moreover, the empirical evidence indicated that these social class positions were themselves ascribed a racialised meaning of a kind similar to that which developed during the industrial period (Chapter 1). Indeed, in the case of the Real Geordies, forms of white identity inhabited by young people were tied to the material and symbolic connections held with the declining local industries in the region. Consequently, the group collectively shared in a repertoire of white male practices that was derived, in part, from a mutual understanding of the culture of manual and skilled labour. They tended to construe themselves as the true inheritors of an industrial, localised form of white masculinity and were intolerant of those who did not conform to their values. As a conservative fraction of the skilled working class, the Real Geordies represented a particular segment of the old labouring population. As such, they were carriers of a normative white ethnicity and most certainly felt that the Charvers lacked the local white credentials they so proudly sported. These honours had been achieved from an upwardly mobile past where the



rewards had been long-term stable employment, 'white flight' from the city and the opportunity to become property owners. That the cornerstone of this hereditary promise had now been stripped away through the dissolution of the apprenticeship scheme and the break up of the region's core industries had only served to encourage the Real Geordies to emphasise their status as authentic whites. In doing so, the subculture was quick to disparage other youth groups who appeared unwilling or unable to live up to the exacting standards of white normalcy they exercised. For as E.P. Thompson has explained, 'class happens when some men [sic.], as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs' (1982:8-9).

Amongst the most noticeable targets in this class and ethnic delineation were Charver Kids who were perceived to be the not-quite-white of Tyneside on account of a convergence of factors - economic, geographic and cultural. While a great deal of attention has been paid to the cultural differences that emerge between social class groups, far less is known about the differences that have arisen within these formations themselves and how they have come to shape the subcultural experiences of young people. Indeed, the distinction that subcultural theorists have made between bourgeois and working class youth culture (for example, middle-class student Hippys and proletarian Skinheads) may be no more pronounced than those that emerge within working class culture itself as seen in the example of the Real Geordies and the Charvers. In this way, understanding internal class and ethnic differences, and how they relate to broader leisure pursuits, values and attitudes may provide for a more refined subcultural analysis. Thus, the portrayal of Charvers as urban primitives essentially stemmed from their status as an impoverished underclass. In this sense, a dichotomy between Real Geordies and Charver Kids was enacted, a split that separated the 'rough' from the 'respectable' echelons of the working class. The 'moral panic' concerning Charver Kids associated them with theft, robbery, car crime, disease, dirt and over-breeding. These social indicators of 'deviancy' were seen to have an historical resonance that drew upon a Victorian fear of and fascination for the city and the peoples who inhabited these central zones. Ultimately such factors

evoked a marked depreciation of the whiteness of Charver youth, locally renowned for their lower-class status. In the final instance the Charvers came to represent a sullied urban underclass.

The focus in this chapter has been upon the intra-ethnic meaning of white working class identity in young people's lives with an appreciation of how whiteness can be variously enacted. The significance of a regional labour culture was seen as we explored young peoples' experience of growing up and the meaning of white cultural identity in the district. Subcultural analysis provided vivid examples of the mutability of white ethnicity amongst young people. These profiles disclosed the multiple responses to white ethnicity made by young white people living in a post-industrial region. The subcultural styles enacted demonstrate that white identities are not only fashioned in relation to blackness but also in association with other versions of whiteness. Thus, Northeast youth subcultures were found to be defining their ethnicities through and against one another in a dynamic nexus of changing relations. The nuanced versions of white ethnicity enacted, splinter hitherto monolithic notions of white identity; in so doing we are encouraged to re-think the 'making' of whiteness in young people's social lives.

In the next chapter we will investigate a third Tyneside subculture comprising 'Wiggers', 'Wannabes' and 'White Negroes'. The young people concerned each display explicit identifications with blackness that range from a superficial appropriation of black culture through to a self-professed desire to 'be' black. The chapter demonstrates how white youth use representations of blackness to experiment with their ethnicities and illustrates the social costs of foregoing whiteness. For some, black culture offered an escape from the 'burden' of whiteness at the expense of an engagement with white ethnicity. For others, black culture offered a critical means for the strategic interrogation of whiteness. In this respect, the chapter draws attention to the various subject positions white youth take up in relation to black culture and reveals the bearing this has upon their ethnicities. As such, the explicit celebration of blackness among white youth did not necessarily go hand in hand with the

relinquishing of racism and white privilege. Moreover, the ethnographic data suggests more sophisticated approaches to young people's ethnicity are required where global change is being negotiated and re-articulated in local environments. In particular, the work focuses upon the contradictory discourses that may arise when white youth masquerade in the 'blackface' of hip-hop, basketball and baggy dress codes. The chapter provides compelling evidence of the 'doing' of ethnicity in young people's lives to demonstrate how ethnic identities can be fashioned and re-fashioned through peer groups practices.

**Part III**

**‘RE-THINKING WHITENESS’**

**NEW YOUTH SUBJECT POSITIONS FOR THE  
MILLENNIUM**

## **New Ethnicities**

### **Wiggers, Wannabes and White Negroes**

#### **Chapter 9**

## Introduction

So there was a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts. The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synopses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro (Mailer, 1970:273).

In 1957 the journalist and novelist Norman Mailer wrote about a curious new phenomenon that existed at the fuzzy edges of American society: the hipster. White hipsters rejected the conventional social values of the time and instead drew inspiration from the American Negro. They were fascinated by the drugs, nightlife, dress-styles and jazz music associated with black Americans. Writing at a time when sexual relations between blacks and whites were taboo, Mailer declared this dusky band of American beatniks to be 'White Negroes'. As we shall go on to find, these early intermezzo subgroups may provide clues to re-thinking new youthful subject positions in the present post-imperial situation. Mailer's early portrait of youth lifestyles suggests that black culture has long been a source of inspiration for white youth as they seek to cut loose from conventional social mores. For some, experimenting with black culture is a tentative, even brief affair. For others the enactment has longer-lasting implications that may come to leave a deeper impression upon their ethnic styles of behaviour. Indeed, throughout my study I encountered a select minority of young people who appeared to be forgoing whiteness in the North East. In the case of these contemporary hipsters it would appear that the myth of the 'White Negro' lives on. As such, this fraction of youth had made visible attempts to escape the socially accepted confines of white cultural identity. The primary mode through which whiteness was 'relinquished', 'reconfigured' or 'abolished' was by way of temporary and sustained engagements with black culture.

In this chapter we will investigate the techniques deployed by young people to enact new ethnicities in the predominantly white conurbation of Tyneside. While a small number of studies have been conducted regarding young people and ethnicity, this research has all but exclusively focused in upon multi-ethnic areas (Hewitt, 1986; Jones; 1988; Wulff, 1995; Back, 1996). Subsequently, this work has drawn attention to the existence of hybrid multi-ethnic dialogues within inner-city zones. In contrast, there has been a near absence of investigation pertaining to the ethnic cultural identities of young people who reside in mainly-white areas. As we shall find, the assumption that young people in these locales are untouched by inter-cultural influences may be unfounded. Rather, the ethnographic evidence suggests that despite the absence of a significant black populace a segment of white youth are nevertheless drawing upon the symbols of black culture and using these to re-fashion their ethnicities.

In the last chapter we discussed the ways in which two working-class subcultures, the Real Geordies and the Charver Kids were differently positioned in relation to whiteness. In this chapter we will begin by discussing the perspectives of a white basketball-playing subculture known locally as the B-Boyz. Through their collective sporting attributes this masculine peer-group were able to sustain connections with black culture. The influence of this could be more widely detected in their subcultural styles and practices. However, the B-Boyz were not the only young people who were outwardly expressing global identities. Closer investigation revealed that a cohort of white students, male and female, were experimenting with their ethnicities in other ways. In particular, the popular arenas of dress style, music and dance culture offered new ways of being beyond the confines of a parochial, white, 'Geordie' identity. Having identified the existence of globalised inter-cultural dialogues the chapter will then go on to consider the more extreme example undertaken by certain white youth who sought a near-complete immersion into black culture. These youth, known widely as 'wannabes', openly expressed a desire to be black. At the same time, the emotional investments in black culture did not necessarily lead to the forging of anti-racist white ethnicities. While some youth interrogated their whiteness and were evidently implicated in the making of a new

cultural heritage, others maintained a pseudo-scientific belief in biological differences between black and white citizens. In this respect, the focus is upon the complex and contradictory fashioning of new ethnicities in a mainly-white region.

*B-Boyz: The discursive production of a term*

In the principally white district of Tyneside evidence of the influence of black culture upon the identities of white youth was on the surface relatively marginal. This contrasts sharply with other British urban centres such as Birmingham, Manchester and London where black cultural style can be vividly detected in the intermeshing youth cultures of African-Caribbean, Asian and white youth. While an isolated number of individuals in the region took it upon themselves to explore the hitherto unexamined potential of their identities, creating new ethnicities without the support of an immediate peer group was always difficult. In the absence of a substantial, visible ethnic minority community in the North East, a cluster of white youth known as the B-Boyz had established a subculture of their own which was directly implicated in the transatlantic, global circuit of cultural production.

The B-Boyz comprised a diverse group that included members from various middle- and working-class backgrounds. Such variation was less apparent in the subcultures of the Real Geordies and Charver Kids where class culture was found to be a source of conflict. Previously, we saw how terms such as 'Geordie' and 'Charver' had an historic and/or colloquial meaning. During the ethnography I discovered that the term 'B-Boy' was a negotiated construct that held multiple and contingent meaning. I was informed the phrase emerged from the subculture's association with basketball, so could be a shorthand term for (B)asketball-Boys. Other members said it was musically derived and drew upon US hip-hop and dance culture where the 'B' could stand for break-dancing, bee-bop or even the Bronx. Some subcultural members claimed it meant they were 'Bad' (Bad-Boyz), an inverted Americanism which implied the linguistic opposite (i.e. they were 'cool', dangerously 'hard').



However, the term was also subject to a number of competing definitions and was frequently deployed in a derogatory manner. Thus, the Real Geordies insisted that the label was used because the group were 'wannabes', that is white youth who 'wanted-to-be' black, hence, (wanna)Bee-Boyz. Another insinuation by the Real Geordies - the ever-present arbiters of ethnicity - was that the B-Boyz were aptly named since they represented that most controversial of social groups, *Black Boyz*. Once again, there was the assertion from the football-playing subculture that they were the 'Real' carriers of white ethnicity and it was the B-Boyz who lacked the moral certainty of whiteness so deeply embedded in 'Geordie' identity. In view of these negative inferences some members of the basketball subculture wished to disassociate themselves from the B-Boyz label. However, nearing the culmination of the ethnography a number of youth had taken up the symbolic marker with pride, in what may be adequately described as a struggle for the sign. Transforming the negative epithet B-Boyz into a positive signifier of identity offered a means through which the subculture could re-define themselves against other social groups and establish a strong collective identity<sup>155</sup>. At the time of writing it remains to be seen whether the phrase B-Boyz will become a long-lasting badge of honour within the corridors of British youth culture.

The most popular term that was used by Real Geordies to describe individuals such as the B-Boyz was the Americanism 'wigger', which implied that the basketball-playing subculture were, literally, 'white niggers'. One is reminded here of Mailer's famous essay, 'The White Negro' cited above and Jack Kerouac's description of white longing in the beatnick novel *On the Road* (1958). As David Roediger (forthcoming) has indicated, the term 'wigger' is not a recent phenomenon but, 'wiggers, meaning white niggers, or whites acting "too black" ... is consistent with the uses of white nigger as a white-on-white epithet ... dating back at least to the nineteenth century ...'. It was this definition of 'wigger' that Real Geordies sought to invoke when disparaging the B-Boyz whom they saw as essentially 'race traitors',

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<sup>155</sup> Similar appropriations have been made concerning the term black, Queer and most controversially, 'nigga'.

people who had relinquished their white heritage in favour of more global, emergent ethnicities<sup>156</sup>.

For other writers, such as those involved with the contemporary abolitionist journal *Race Traitor*, being a 'wigger' offers an escape from the restrictive bonds of whiteness for the individual, while posing a collective threat to the white majority. According to Phil Rubio, 'The "exceptional white" has historically been regarded with a mixture of envy and loathing by the larger white society, serving as a projection of that part of the consciousness of most whites that knows what is morally right and which path represents freedom' (1994:80). The difference between B-Boyz as 'exceptional whites' and other young people could be most obviously expressed through dress codes, music and sport. However, what the empirical research suggests is that while the B-Boyz could invoke a radical reconfiguration of whiteness through forms of creative ethnic expression, they were also inclined to assign aspects of bodily racial difference to black people. We will now consider the social practices of the B-Boyz in relation to sport, fashion and music, for it was within these cultural realms that the interrogation of whiteness was most evidently being undertaken. Possibilities for the making of a new cultural heritage can be detected in young peoples' experimental exploration of ethnicity.

#### *Whitemen can't jump?: B-Boyz and basketball*

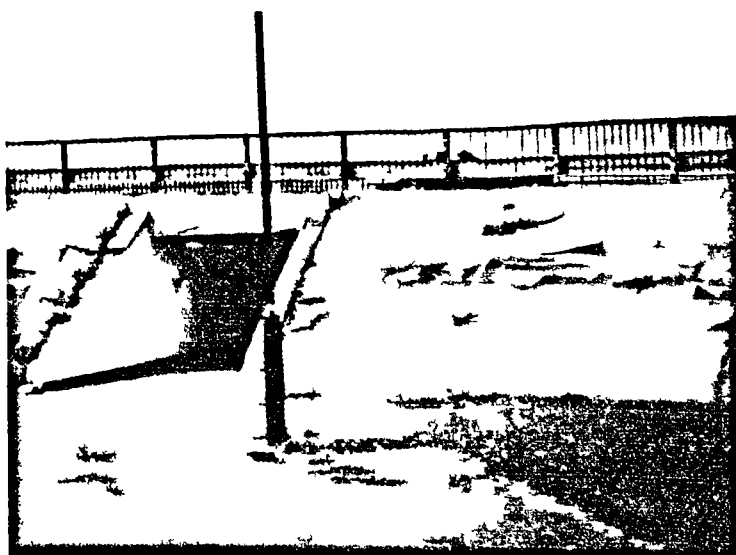
... basketball is more than a sport; it is a cultural practice ... it's symbols and myths are deeply racialized. Images of basketball become a site for understanding relations between the black and white races between the city and the suburbs (Brown, 1997:103).

Mathew Brown's quotation above draws attention to the racialisation of basketball and interconnects this with the issue of spatiality (see Chapter 1, 4). In this section we will examine how the sport became a cultural signifier of blackness in the mainly-white locale, and the effects this process of racialisation had upon the lives of

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<sup>156</sup> Instead, the Real Geordies were obsessed with the assertion of local identities - 'Geordies' and

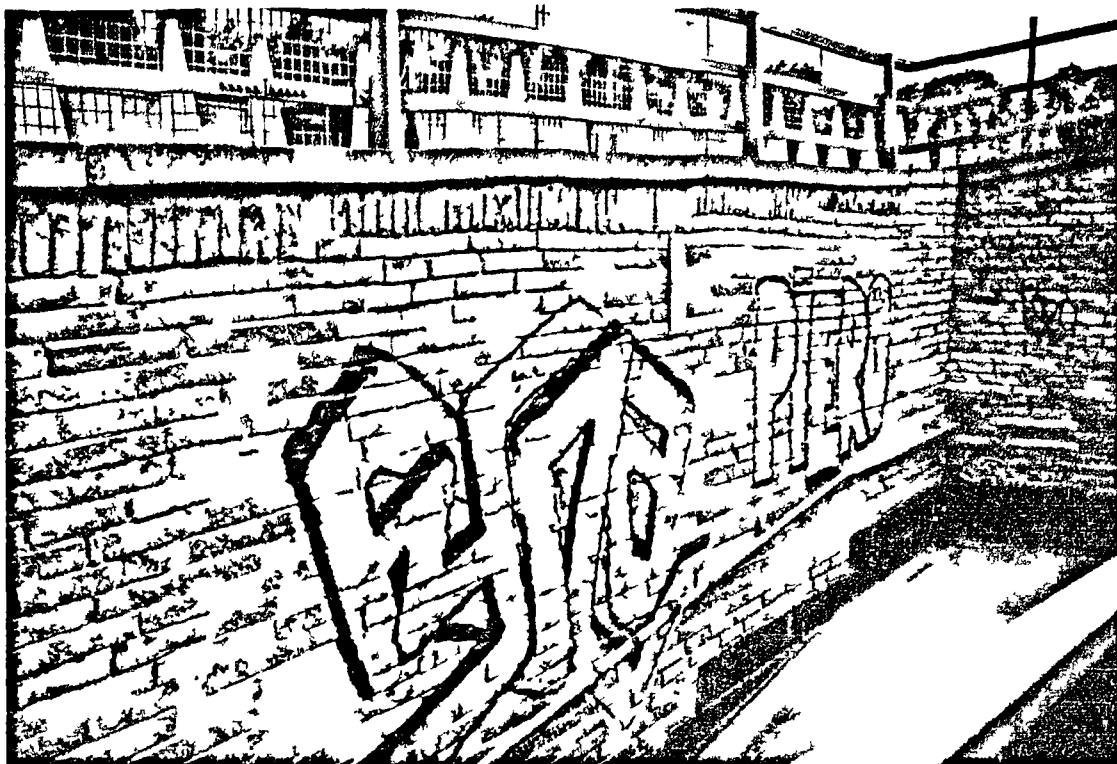
Tyneside's expressive B-Boyz. Indeed, in both Emblevale and Snowhill Comprehensive basketball was something more than a sport, it was also a wider 'cultural practice' to be lived out on the social landscape and the loaded surfaces of the body as 'style'. In this sense, the sporting affiliations of the B-Boyz became an arena for the complex interplay of numerous ethnic engagements. In Emblevale School the first remark made to me by students questioned whether I played basketball. At Snowhill Comprehensive, I quickly became aware of a spatial contestation that was taking place on the playground as the B-Boyz jostled for space with the Real Geordies, who had hitherto occupied the central spaces for football games. These dynamics could also be traced in the wider community when hip-hop culture met with community forms of nationalism (fig. 3.7). The B-Boyz challenged this dominance through their own bodily arrangement and the new styles they introduced into 'Geordie' youth culture (fig 3.8). In the social schema of Raymond Williams' (1958[1971]), the Real Geordies, as dispossessed working-class youth can be said to have represented a 'residual culture' in contrast to the 'emergent culture' being forged by the wiggers and B-Boyz. Notwithstanding the occasional brief conflict, by the end of my time at Snowhill Comprehensive the B-Boyz had managed to lay claim to particular segments of the playground which at one time would have been seen as the sole territory of the 'lads', the Real Geordies.



*Fig. 3.7 B-Boy graffiti, over-laid with the Union Jack symbol of a Real Geordie 'parochial patriotism'.*

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'Makums'; Northerners and Southerners; who was 'Real' and who was a 'wannabe'.



*Fig. 3.8 African-American urban culture has influenced Tyneside's Wiggers, Wannabes and White Negroes.*

Members of the B-Boyz remarked on the flourishing interest in basketball that had started in their Year Group and was now rapidly spreading to younger students:

John (16 years): Our Year's probably the best Year for basketball the school's ever had.

Chris (17 years): We got to the semi-finals of the Northern Pool International Cup. It was just a fluke how there was so many people like in one Year who like the same thing. And it was still a minority sport but at least you could see it.

Where basketball had been a minority interest, relegated to the outskirts of the playground, its popularity was now extending into other leisure spaces and could be detected in a range of sportswear as we shall go on to see. Chris, whom we heard from above, had been an exceptional player and was previously involved in Tyneside's Under-17s team. Sadly, he was forced to retire from the game after developing a career-ending knee injury, but basketball had nevertheless provided him

with the opportunity to form new alliances. Chris told me how living in Tyneside and attending Snowhill Comprehensive with its massive white majority meant he had never really come into contact with black people. This situation had altered as his interest in basketball mushroomed. I asked him if there were any black players in the squad:

Chris: Most of the professional team were. I was like Under-17s and that. But most of the professional team was black. The best players on it was black, and like my coach was black! So I associated with them, and all.

According to Chris, basketball offered him his first prolonged contact with black youth. It opened a passageway towards meeting other black players and allowed him to develop multi-ethnic bonds in the otherwise white highlands of the city.

Moreover, Chris developed other tastes in dress style and music as he became more acquainted with youthful black culture. He reported how he ‘used to be a basketball fan and like try and wear the same type of baggy shorts the players wear and same kind of cool trainers’. In this respect the sport of basketball was able to open up Chris’s social world to new experiences and cultural practices beyond the immediate local environment as he travelled to games with the team and met other black players from different cities. Thus, it was through an engagement with blackness that white youth like Chris came to understand the meaning of whiteness in their social lives. Indeed, basketball culture encouraged Chris to become aware of his conservative ‘white’ dress style, for example, as he gradually began to adjust it in accordance with his new-found black peer group. This self-conscious attempt to grapple with white ‘self-hood’ can provide revealing insight into how, why and where the boundaries of whiteness are constructed and regulated. However, negotiating these changes could be problematic without the support of a black friendship group at school or in the local neighbourhood. As a consequence, the B-Boyz risked being abused as ‘race traitors’:

[16-17 years]

John: You got a bit of prejudice if you were one of the basketball players.

Chris: And you'd get stick cos you didn't like footbaal as much.

*Anoop: What got said?*

John: Are you one of these B-ballers and that. They just couldn't understand reely. They'd say, 'I hate that' and they reely can't even see how you can like that.

Chris: Like they don't like basketball so they can't see how anyone can ... and anyone who does like it must be a bit of a fool.

In the near absence of a significant black population the B-Boyz became easy targets for assuming the role of a racialised Other. In the white peripheries of the North East the multi-ethnic style of the Boyz encouraged them to become the select repositories for racial intolerance. As the extract reveals, the language of race was surreptitiously inscribed in both the treatment of, and responses from, the B-Boyz. Depicted as 'wiggers' the B-Boyz explained to me how they were subjected to 'prejudice' from Real Geordies, a term that implied some form of racist discrimination. The cost of foregoing the established forms of white cultural identity embodied in the masculinism of the Real Geordies meant incurring hostile reactions. The Boyz claimed that they received 'stick' and were 'discriminated against' because they chose to wear different clothes and adopt a repertoire of style that was alternative to the majority of 'Geordie' youth. Some members reported that this had resulted in them being chased, harassed and beaten up by other young people. However, the growth of the subculture also meant more people were now taking an interest in the sport and the style was gaining an increasing visibility.

The B-Boyz saw basketball as a rapidly expanding sport and enthused about the increased coverage being given at the time by Channel 4. They seemed acutely attentive to the 'inheritance' claims of the Real Geordies discussed previously and consciously wanted to subvert the legacy of their social standing.

Chris: The thing I would like to do would be teach my son basketball.

John: Yeah!

Chris: I could play against him and I could teach him what I know, and get him going so he could be one of the top in the sport. I've had me injuries so I can't play anymore.

By imagining they were teaching their future offspring basketball, the B-Boyz were toying with notions of a new, masculine cultural inheritance. While the new ethnicities adopted by the B-Boyz stood in stark contrast with the parochial identities of the Real Geordies each subculture could be seen to be designing their own future utopias. Moreover, the differences between the two groups extended well beyond their emphatic sporting allegiances. Of particular interest, then, was the process by which basketball developed from being simply a sport to becoming a subcultural practice. Chris explains how playing basketball was cultivated over time into the formation of a subculture.

Chris: I played it [basketball] for the school and liked it, I watched it a couple of times and thought it was good. There was a few people into it, there's loads [now], we all got together and started listening to the music that seemed to fit with the sport.

*Anoop: What music was associated with the sport?*

Chris: Well rap music, I suppose, with basketball. I dunno why but it just does, it just *seems* right. And it's also black culture, in basketball there's a lot of black culture. The best players are black in general.

So, there appears a type of 'fit' between basketball, hip-hop and black culture that the B-Boyz could be said to subscribe to. The organic development of this stylistic repertoire was implicit, 'it just *seems* right'. Paul Willis (1978) in his study of Bikers and Hippy Acid Heads has used the phrase 'homology' to explain the types of stylistic association made between music, dress, attitudes and behaviour. The homology or 'fit' that extended from basketball to hip-hop, particular hairstyles and fashions will be the focus of our next section.

*White Skin / Black Masks? Style, music and fashion*

The symbolic challenge offered by the B-Boyz to the Real Geordies was, then, not merely about preferring basketball to football. There was a sense that each group had an opposing philosophic ethos that was implicitly ethnically divergent. These nuances were seen in a multitude of stylistic references. B-Boyz favoured hip-hop over Brit-pop, basketball over football, baggy American street-wear over smart casual designer labels. A sub-stratum of white youth had taken up this urban, black American style and were using it to form a distinct subculture of their own. I enquired about the particularities of this emerging style:

[11-12 years]

Sam: There's normally baggy clothes for hip-hop. I normally wear baggy clothes and caps and everythin'. Basketball tops and jeans, big jackets and everythin'.

Anoop: *And that's the stuff you wear?*

Sam: Yeah. It's big and baggy.

James: I normally wear the fashion stuff, like Adidas pants and that.

Nicola: Nike.

That the clothes of these youth were 'big and baggy', unlike the tailored, Modish appearance favoured by the Real Geordies, was not itself inconsequential. The B-Boyz were not simply taking on an imported version of American youth culture, they were also arranging their identities against the parochial values of the Real Geordies. In this respect the Boyz invoked a dialectical relationship between global and local cultures. These 'style wars' need to be understood not just in the material relations between youth and their parental generation, but in the internal configurations that arise amongst different youth groups themselves. The subculture had a global outlook that stretched across the Atlantic for its points of reference: basketball, hip-hop, black urban culture. The dress code of the B-Boyz was also expansive, it was



transnational in that it looked beyond the locality and stretched the boundaries of identity. It's shapeless form can be read both as a metaphor for the fluidity of the B-Boyz identity (they had a global perspective), and as a symbol of the blurring of conventional boundaries (they were regarded as 'white niggers'). The subculture wore long t-shirts and baseball caps out of school that carried symbols relating to American basketball teams in a switch away from the obligatory NUFC insignia of the parochial Real Geordies. Furthermore, the transatlantic dress code of the group was seen by the Real Geordies as global not local and deemed to be essentially 'UnBritish'. Indeed the fabric of B-Boyz subculture could be used to knit the group together, bonding them against the hostilities they were made to endure from others who saw them as 'race traitors'. Even so, this did not deter white hip-hop followers, B-Boyz and other white renegades from expressing their subcultural allegiances through style:

*Anoop: Is there a link between basketball and hip-hop then?*

Sam: Well it's American.

James: It is. It's like American and basketball's baggy stuff and dead long t-shirts.

*Sam: Cos everyone that plays basketball listens to hip-hop.*

*Anoop: Do you?*

Sam: Yeah ... Me big brother plays for the Under-15s Newcastle team, the Newcastle Sparrowhawks.

The 'baggy' gear and 'long t-shirts' worn by the B-Boyz signified their interests in basketball and hip-hop music. The connections are further shown with Sam's remark that 'everyone who plays basketball listens to hip-hop'. While this may be something of an exaggeration, it illustrates how a subcultural identity can be realised through a combination of sport, fashion, music and shared value systems.

If basketball offered a masculine arena for the negotiation of white ethnicity, music and fashion appeared to offer more inclusive points of identification for young women. Both males and females expressed a desire to experiment with black hairstyles:

Michelle: I want my hair beaded.

Nicola: I want my hair beaded.

*Anoop: Beaded?*

Sara: It takes about seven hours to do.

Michelle: And then you get little beads and you plait them.

Sara: It takes ages to do it and when you take it out it rips all your hair.

*Anoop: So who wants it?*

Sara, Michelle, Nicola: [*together*] I want it!

James: My sista's got her's done like that, about forty of them.

Sam: You have tiny little plaits and then you put beads in it.

*Anoop: So what kinda style is that?*

Sam: It's called braids. Braids.

Nicola: It's plaited and you can get fake hair and they plait it to there [*demonstrates length*].

Although hair braiding involves intense bodily labour and a certain amount of pain, young women were not put off by the idea. However, the explicit longing attributed towards particular ethnic signifiers of style such as hair, clothes and music was largely concerned with the *symbolic* aspects of blackness. It did not signify a reconfiguration of values beyond the level of style as it had done for certain members of the B-Boyz who had formed lasting friendships with black youth as a consequence of direct interracial contact. While girls fantasised about tightly plaited hair with beads, boys too spoke of having various patterns or insignia shaved into their head.

James: I like the bricks me. You get all of it shaved off to a No.2 or 3 or something, then you get a step shaved in a No.1. Y’kna bricks.

*Anoop: Bricks?*

James: Aye, like little rectangles shaved in with a step.

Michelle: With lines.

Hairstyles in this vein included shaving zig-zags into the scalp, or even etching labels such as the brands *Nike* or *No Fear*. Clearly, many of these cuts were stylistic appropriations of black culture by white youth and were evidence of what Dick Hebdidge has described as a ‘phantom history of race relations’ (1987:44-45) enacted on the loaded surfaces of post-war British, working-class youth culture. However, for a section of Tyneside youth, black culture also offered possibilities for new forms of ethnic experimentation to take place. Some white youth openly acknowledged their identifications with black culture:

{16-17 years}

*Anoop: What do you mean when you say you’re into ‘black style’?*

Helena: Like the clothes style, the style of going out, music style ... yeah, the hairstyles and everything.

*Anoop: So what are those styles?*

Helena: It’s African things. All strange styles, cos here in Europe it’s like all boring hairstyles.

Jolene: And the black Americans, it’s like the hair, they do so much with it and we canna do anything like that.

Discussions concerning style offered a partial glimpse into white dissatisfaction. At such moments, whiteness was constructed as ‘boring’, monolithic and bland. However, it would be wrong to read these sentiments as anything other than a selective appreciation for black culture within a particular youth context. Thus, James who had previously mentioned that his sister wore African-style braids later

revealed, 'My sista does kna like black fellas ... She'd ravver 'ave a white fella than a black fella'. Such accounts flag up the limits of cultural hybridity, where racism could still be used to mark boundaries between Self and Other, despite the presence of channels of dialogic exchange and incorporation<sup>157</sup>. As such, the overarching whiteness of the Tyneside conurbation and the absence of a variety of recognisable black street styles is prohibitive to wider adolescent ethnic experimentation. Moreover, where creative interracial dialogues do occur through subcultural style, they are likely to remain short-lived.

However, for a select number of white youth who had developed a deeper race consciousness, and those who sustained contact with black friends, a more sensitive appreciation of the politics of race, ethnicity and nationhood could yet be achieved. Students such as Helena (17 years), whose life history will be further discussed in the next chapter, spoke directly about political issues concerned with social class, racism and discrimination. She was especially critical of young people who celebrated aspects of black culture but retained an overall posture of white chauvinism.

Helena: One of my friends is like, 'I'd love to be black, *but* ...', and they're okay about it. Some of them are racist, I'm talking to them and everything, saying, 'I really like you as a friend but don't like that opinion'.

*Anoop: They're racist even though they're into black music?*

Helena: Yeah, black music but not black anything else! They wear some hip-hop clothes. They go on about how the government spend the money on black people and everything, rather than on white. They don't say it in front of me cos I'll cut their head off in me words, with me arguments.

While this may appear a rather extreme example of how blackness could be openly embraced on one level and yet completely forsaken at another, we may wish to hold

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<sup>157</sup> In contrast, Wulff's (1995) study of white adolescent girls who had formed black friendships in the multi-ethnic district of South London draws a more positive conclusion. The author claims, 'it is likely that the idea of ethnic equality will stay with them as they grow up to be young women' (p.17) indicating the meaningfulness of direct black-white interaction.

in mind the curious history of the Skinheads and their ambiguous relationship to black culture (Chapters 4, 5). Helena's identification with blackness extended into music, dress and complex forms of body management (engaging in 'black' forms of dancing, invoking black stylised gestures or expressions, even attempting to 'turn black' through the daily use of a sun-bed). Moreover, Helena's Norwegian-Geordie dialect was inflected with a lexicon of cultural phrases derived from her previous black friendship group and then further developed by listening to rap and swing records. I went on to ask Helena if it was possible to like black music but still be racist and she was in little doubt, 'Yeah, it's so stupid, aye it is mon'.

Other students such as Sam (12 years) also saw beneath superficial dialogues with black culture attempted by some white youth. Sam was an avid fan of hip-hop and reggae music and had an appreciation for black artists, especially the deceased reggae artist Bob Marley. Throughout the fieldwork period we shared lengthy conversations about Marley's life and music. Sam would frequently defend his preference for Bob Marley over newer artists such as the *Fugees* who he pointed out were 'copyin' him'. His allegiance to the 'cult of Bob' was such that in one interview he boldly stated, 'I would like to live in Jamaica and be a Rasta!'. At this point I made the mistake of presuming Sam wished to be black, yet this was not what he had said, for to him there was no contradiction in being a white Rastafarian (see Jones, 1988). Indeed, Sam's identification with Bob Marley encouraged him to consider getting dreadlocks in his hair at a time when most B-Boyz and fetishists of black style wanted to shave patterns or tram-lines into their scalps. His comments reveal how ethnic experimentation is often likely to be a solitary pursuit in mainly-white areas:

[12 years]

Sam: I'm gettin' dreadlocks, me mam says I can get them if I have the money.

*Anoop: Isn't your hair too short Sam?*

Sam: I'm getting it done in the last three weeks of the Summer holidays, or the last.

Nicola: You can get 'em done short.

Anoop: *Has anyone else got dreadlocks in the school?*

Sam: Naa.

Anoop: *Then why do you want them?*

Nicola: Cos it means you're different.

Sam; Yeah, it's different. But I like Bob Marley music as well, I like reggae music and hip-hop. I'd like it done, it's different.

In many cases it was difficult to know whether the embodied desire for intercultural exchange would be effected. However, disclosing desires for braids or dreadlocks in front of friends was a means by which these ideas could be 'tried out' in the immediate peer group to see whether such practices would be approved or opposed. For Sam, as long as the identification with Bob Marley and reggae were consistent, the *fantasy* of 'crossing over' and becoming a Rasta remained. Kobena Mercer (1994) has written extensively about the political signification carried by black hairstyles at particular moments. He argues that dreadlocks were not a 'natural' black style but were 'stylistically *cultivated* and politically *constructed* in a particular historical moment as part of a strategic contestation of white dominance and the cultural power of whiteness' [original emphasis] (1994:108)<sup>158</sup>. The wearing of dreadlocks by white youth, amidst the ever-popular skinhead styles in the locality, can also contest whiteness, albeit in differing circumstances<sup>159</sup>. However, in a multi-ethnic context Jones (1988) found that many white youth with black friends had been through adolescent phases of having dreadlocks but only those with a more thought out ideological position maintained this look through their later teenage years. Sam's comments should be read cautiously in the light of this knowledge, but we should not forget the absence of an immediate black peer group in the Tyneside setting.

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<sup>158</sup> In his study of the Rasta Heads in *Young, Gifted and Black* Mac an Ghaill (1988) found that this type of black style could be used by young men as a form of resistance to schooling authorities. See also Dick Hebdige's paper 'Reggae, Rastas and Rudies' in *Resistance Through Rituals* (1977).

<sup>159</sup> In contemporary British street culture, white youth with dreadlocks are frequently associated with a different subculture, 'Crusties'. These youth are sometimes associated with travellers, New Age and Green politics. Social stereotypes of the group encompass Crusties being unkempt cider drinkers who rarely wash, have dogs on strings and enjoy living in squalor.

Moreover, where others spoke of an inability to understand certain rap or reggae terms, Sam claimed to have an elementary understanding of patois and Creole phrases.

Michelle: It doesn't make sense, *No Woman, No Cry* [A Bob Marley song] what's that mean?

Sam: It does.

[...]

Anoop: *So, do you understand what they say on rap or reggae records?*

All: Naa.

Sam: Aye. [To the rest of the group] It's jus' cos you don't listen!

Whereas most of the young people felt that Bob Marley's lyrics were somewhat opaque, Sam had spent time listening to, and interpreting, the meanings of black music. In an early article on black feminism, Hazel V. Carby (1982) urges white women to 'listen to' the qualitatively different life experiences of black women (see Chapter 2). In a sense, Sam's challenge to the claim that reggae is impenetrable and his assertion that white youth did not listen to black experiences, is a challenge to conventional white wisdom. Sam's fascination with black culture stemmed from a passion for music, an emerging interest in black politics, and a desire to be 'different'. He held the strongest anti-racist feelings of the youth I encountered in Emblevale and directly reprimanded other students when on occasion they slipped into racist discourses.

While not all students showed a commitment to black culture *and* anti-racism, some did emphasise the political aspects of black cultural style. Fern pointed out that 'Coloured people think their clothes are special' and Alistair added that this was 'Cos it's got a culture behind it'. In such statements whiteness was viewed as an empty category that was somehow 'cultureless'. By way of contrast black culture was profoundly political:

[10-11 years]

Alistair: I like the *Fugees* and *Coolio*.

Anoop: *What's good about the Fugees then?*

Andrew: Well, they've got good songs, songs like *Bounty Killer* and it's really good.

Alistair: They've got other things as well, like singing about Africa and the refugees as well.

Anoop: *Is that important?*

Andrew: Yeah, cos it gets a message across, cos people listen to loads of music.

Andrew's favourite musical artists were *Public Enemy* and the *Fugees*. He emphasised the political messages carried by these groups and claimed that they had encouraged him to reflect more on issues of social concern. The discussion of black music implicitly critiqued the hollowness of whiteness:

Alistair: The songs 'ave got *life* in them.

Andrew: Cos it sounds like they're actually gonna do something. Y'kna', like the singin' and tha'? It sounds like they've got something to say, and they've got something to do. And we just sing for the fun of it. You hear all these new things, like *911* comin' in, like *Boyzone* an' it's all about love stuff and tha'. All this rap like *Tupac*<sup>160</sup>, most of the songs, they're saying stuff what's happened [...] They're not actually sayin', 'We need help' but in the songs it's there [...] England's slightly borin' cos you've got everythin' an' you've done it all, you're jus' waitin' to get older [...] They [blacks] actually sing about wha's happenin', and we sing about love songs and tha'. We're not tellin' anyone anythin'! They do. People understand them.

Andrew's sentiment that people relate to the message of black music reveals his own subjective identifications. The responses indicate that black music has 'life' in it, it is trying to 'do' something, and is grounded in 'reality'. By contrast, we can suggest that the norm against which this form is judged, 'white' music, is lifeless, passive

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<sup>160</sup> Tupac Shakur was a controversial gangsta rapper signed to the American label Deathrow. In 1996 he was shot dead at the age of 25 years.



and unexciting. In classroom cultures, the epitome of this was 'boy bands' and upper class 'white' music styles, especially classical. The replies reveal much about broader perceptions of whiteness.

*Anoop: Why don't you like classical?*

Jane: It's jus' borin'.

Andrew: Too squeaky.

Kirsty: It's got violins and trumpets and things like that, piano.

Andrew: It's got no beat! Jus' [*starts humming*].

Fern: It's jus' all plain and borin'.

Kirsty: It's like Victorian.

This discussion on Western music is similar to the interviews Ruth Frankenberg (1994) had with white, American women in Southern California (Chapter 2). Some of the interviewees regarded Western music as plain, bland and lifeless. Similarly, the students I encountered described Western music (including 'boy bands') as squeaky-clean, 'plain and borin'', somewhat staid, and in the case of classical music 'Victorian'. The starched lifelessness of 'white' music ('it's got no (heart)beat')<sup>161</sup> was in direct comparison to the energy and exuberance embedded in black cultural style: 'People, like, into rap will appear like Ravers, real mad people - people like myself' (Andrew). Black music according to Andrew, captured the active dynamism of urban US streetlife. His imaginative identifications with it suggested possibilities for his own life. By and large it was precisely at the points where blackness held high prestige in youth culture by way of music, sport, language, street-style and 'attitude' that it was at its most deliriously attractive. However, as a consequence of the imagined sterility of whiteness when contrasted with the youthful verve of black culture, some young people extended their identifications with blackness into new forms of ethnicity as we shall now discover. For these white youth black culture offered new possibilities for reconstituting white ethnicity altogether.

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<sup>161</sup> Richard Dyer (1997) in his book *White* equates whiteness with death and the non-corporeal.

### *White Negroes in the Northeast of England*

Whereas black culture was a repository for ethnic experimentation amongst certain white youth, a few went as far as to directly proclaim a desire to 'be' black (an issue further discussed in Chapter 10). These students expressed subjective identifications with blackness that at times transcended the politics of style. Such white mavericks may be thought of as Tyneside's very own contemporary White Negroes. As we will find, the desire to 'be' black was by no means unproblematic and remains only one, rather utopian solution to the inexplicable issue of white, English ethnicity (Chapter 7). Nevertheless, a minority of white students had reckoned with the consequences of racism and still professed a desire to 'be' black:

Sam: I'd like to be black cos I wouldn't mind it. I'd like to see what the black people 'ave suffered. See what I mean? Everyone says that they're h'ways bein' caal names so I'd like a'see what it was like to be black.

The fantasy of 'getting into the skin' of the Other was most explicitly referred to by Helena, who's life-history account is encountered in Chapter 10. She revealed her cross-over dreams to me: 'I've always had my little dream since I was like a little kid, like "Dad, why can't you be black?" Even if I'd be bullied I've always wanted the black colour and everything'. Helena went on to compare her younger self to an inverse image of Michael Jackson, admitting that she tried everything to 'become black' in the same way that the musical artist is alleged to have used surgical operation to 'turn white'<sup>162</sup>. Like a 'photographic negative' (Mercer, 1994) Helena sought to superimpose a reverse image of blackness upon her white self<sup>163</sup>:

Helena: (*Adamantly*) I want to have a colour. I want to have some tan.

*Anoop: It's quite important to you?*

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<sup>162</sup> Jackson has spoken out against these allegations claiming that he has a rare skin disease which has caused his pigmentation to discolour.

<sup>163</sup> We shall discuss Helena's case in more detail in Chapter 10, whereupon it is discovered that she had periodically spent large sums of money on tanning products and sun-bed sessions in an attempt to darken her skin.

Helena: Yeah, I think you can relax more. I can relax more when I look tanned. Otherwise I think, 'Oh look at my white legs!' I can't go out without tights that have colour. (*With embarrassment*) I feel so stupid mon!

Having moved through such early-adolescent forms of experimentation, Helena now drew upon black culture in a more self-conscious, politically aware manner. For Helena, the politics of race were now given special meaning through an experiential understanding of social class oppression. This process involves firstly decoding the attendant meaning of race as it is understood in popular youth culture. Secondly, these values have to be skilfully encoded through a critically informed white working-class consciousness. This enables white youth to negotiate new cultural references that allow them to participate in the language of oppression and resistance found in black culture and hip-hop music. Helena felt the messages embedded in hip-hop and rap had increased her class-consciousness, 'If you get in an argument with one of these Conservative people' she warned, 'you learn to stand up for your rights'. In this way, Helena saw hip-hop as a movement that articulated the anger and frustration of the socially and economically disenfranchised, including certain white Europeans. She had signed up to the Labour Youth Party and saw hip-hop and politics as interrelated. 'If you look under the text at the lyrics' she rhapsodised, 'it's about the underclass'.

Other white students had also thought about 'being' black and a few had even considered the cost of racism as we saw above. These students were not completely naive about the effects of racism but felt there were other unspoken benefits in inhabiting a black identity.

[10 years]

*Anoop: Is there any advantage to being black?*

Andrew: Yeah, it says in the encyclopaedia that 'if you've got black skin you can't get burnt as easily. But not jus' for tha' reason, I'd jus' prefer to be like tha'.

*Anoop: Can you explain that?*

Andrew: I dunno, I'd just preferred to be coloured.

*Anoop: Why?*

Andrew: I dunno, I jus' think it would be much better.

*Anoop: But do you think there would be any problems with that?*

Andrew: No, I'd like to be coloured cos if I was an' people started takin' the mick I'd jus', like, stand up for it an' not take it. Like if my friends were all coloured I'd like tell 'em [*stands up*] 'Stand up for it!'<sup>164</sup>

In the coolness of academic prose it is difficult to capture the sense of passion in the above statements. When Andrew excitedly talked about 'standing up' for black rights, it seemed as if he could momentarily inhabit a black identity. When Sam declared that he wanted to be a Rasta and live in Jamaica, he appeared deadly serious. Although these opinions may no doubt change throughout young people's coming-of-age, it would be most disingenuous to dismiss them as insignificant phases in their lives. Consequently, the initial interest in basketball and black street-culture held by students like Chris extended into black friendships and a fuller understanding of ethnic minority experiences. Similarly Sam's fascination with Bob Marley had encouraged him to gain a certain amount of fluency in patois and black 'speak'. This had enabled him to reflect on the social messages delivered in various sound tracks. It also provided a cultural forum for learning about particular black experiences and the consequences of racism. Helena, too, believed that music and black friends had helped her to better develop a politicised race consciousness, indeed she was intolerant towards white peers who appropriated aspects of the culture whilst maintaining a disrespectful attitude to black people.

Helena had only recently joined Snowhill Comprehensive but had quickly become best friends with Beverly, one of the few black students in the school (see Appendix). Helena emphasised how she felt much more comfortable around black people than whites: 'Like [with] Beverly, we're really close about music and we talk about it for

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<sup>164</sup> One may be reminded here of the Bob Marley lyric, 'Get up, stand up/Stand up for your rights'.

hours and hours and hours'. In-depth discussion revealed that Beverly and Helena participated in what has been described as a 'culture of the bedroom' (McRobbie & Garber, 1977:213), which offers girls an intimate space to chat and 'hang out' as well as to experiment with singing, rapping and dancing. In many respects for the young women concerned the bedroom represented a paradoxical space. On the one hand it was place of control and confinement, while on the other it was a zone for freedom of expression: a space in which to live out fantasies of the self. When asked what occurred in these shared yet private spaces Helena remarked how Beverly and herself, 'Like rap to each other' whimsically adding, 'we can do anything'. The 'bedroom rap' referred was literally a form of *rappport* that also encompassed rhymes, songs and daily chat. In the mainly-white periphery of the Northeast the bedroom was also a safe space for intercultural dialogue and the elaboration of a black vernacular.

Furthermore, the learning of new ethnicities in the bedroom offered a means of transgressing the gendered confines rigidly ascribed to white femininity. Helena wore a particular style of baggy clothes, trainers and sweatshirts. She indicated how these items had a unisex status that many Tyneside women tended to avoid. For Helena 'baggy' style was a form of self-expression that crossed the boundaries of ethnicity and gender.

*Anoop: Are there others that wear the same as you?*

Helena: Mmmm. The lads, not the lasses. Just the lads and one of me black friends, Beverly. Me and Beverly wear all the same clothes and everything, and the lads.

*Anoop: Why is it mainly lads?*

Helena: Cos like basketball maybe, skate-boards, skating.

Participation in black culture, may, then, offer opportunities for meeting black youth and developing multi-ethnic friendships in white locales. In so doing it can rupture the conventional strictures of white femininity which not unlike a symbolic corset are

tightly laced through conservative ideals. Helena explained how she was going out in the evening to a school dinner dance at a hotel where she would be dressed differently to her white female friends. She revealed, 'I'm the only one that's gonna wear pants. Everyone's going posh and everything in dresses and I'm gonna wear like me pants'. In her study of interracial friendships among teenage girls in South London, Wulff (1995) confirms how the embodiment of black style by white girls can have beneficial effects on these individuals in the long-term as they grow to deal with multi-cultural Britain. She concludes that in the process of ethnic experimentation young white women internalise 'ethnic equality with their femininity through bodily consumption of youth styles and music' (1995:77). Similarly, in a piece about 'different, youthful subjectivities', McRobbie (1997:36) has recently indicated how contemporary Jamaican dance music can offer a space for what she describes as a 'changing mode of femininity'. Helena also recalled, 'When I came to [name of place] this Autumn I was like (*excited tone*), 'Ah, Tina!' she loves my music'. During the ethnography another female student referred to the seductive appeal of Asian femininities. She sighed, 'I would like to be brown - I'd wear all the clothes, saris and that' (Kirsty, 11 years). In each of these cases it is black and Asian culture that allows white youth the potential for developing anti-racist new ethnicities since it provides them with a looking glass with which to reflect back upon their whiteness.

While popular culture can be a site of transformation, I would like to take this opportunity to address the common misconception that white young people who affect black style necessarily want to 'be' black. While researchers in multi-ethnic, urban districts have commented on the propensity for certain white youth to want to 'be' black (Hewitt, 1986; Jones, 1988; Back, 1996) this issue requires further interrogation in the 'white highlands' of British Northern areas such as Tyneside. On the surface it appears strange that a minority of white youth should identify with blackness in the absence of an established black population. It may be that global, accelerated, mass media images of black American culture have become desirable models of youth style for all young people to follow. Yet as we have seen British youth cultures have been highly innovative when it comes to making unique fashion

statements (Chapter 4). Moreover, I would suggest we may need to re-think what is meant by the notion of white youth wanting to 'be' black. While this statement was made by some young people in both Tyneside and the West Midlands further ethnographic research implied that the young people did not want to 'be' black as such, rather, they wanted what was culturally ascribed to 'being' black. This is something very different altogether.

Evidence of the socially constructed nature of such longing exists when we find that many youth identify with what is a selected composition of blackness, usually based on a hyper-masculine image of black identity. Further research is required to discover if there are any white youth who want to 'be' Pakistani, Chinese or Korean for example. Moreover, the African foreign students from places such as Ghana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe were rarely seen as archetypes for the styles of (urban American) blackness the young people I encountered sought to inhabit. This version of blackness was not, for want of a better word, 'sexy' enough (Sewell, 1997). As Stuart Hall (1993:254) has implied, 'the question of the black subject cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity'. Understanding that the claims made by white youth to 'be' black are a culturally constituted set of desires may move us beyond what on the surface appears an implausible identification. Helena's comment that some white youth were into 'black music but not black anything else' and James' reference to his sister who wore beads in her hair but 'does kna like black fellas', serve as a sociological reminder of the dangers of confusing a wish to 'be' black with the meaning of blackness as it is culturally represented in youth peer groups. In this next and final section we will now explore the contradictions that lie at the very heart of white desire for blackness.

#### *'Strange Fruit': Black bodies - white fetish*

Through the figure of the non-white person, whites can feel what being, physicality, presence, might be like, while also dissociating themselves from the non-whiteness of such things. This would work well were it not for the fact that it also constantly risks reminding whites of what they are relinquishing in their assumption of whiteness: 'fun', 'life' (Dyer, 1997:80).

Studies of youth subculture have tended to pay an inordinate amount of attention to the transgressive elements residing within these formations. For example, scholars from the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) tended to view youth subcultures as 'rituals of resistance' (Chapter 4). Here, the focus has been on the hegemonic contestation that occurs when young people evoke subculture 'as against' the existing social economic apparatus. As such, less attention has been paid to the conformist or reactionary elements embedded in subcultural practice, such as those deployed by the Real Geordies or the Skinheads (Chapters 5, 8). Thus, the nostalgic depiction of subculture as '*meaningful mutations*' (Hebdige, 1987:131) almost always seems to read this 'meaningfulness' in terms of some kind of resistance, real or symbolic. Accordingly, Hebdige concludes his eloquent study with the claim that 'subculture ... [is] a form of resistance in which experienced contradictions and objections to this ruling ideology are obliquely represented in style' (1987:133).

While the shaggy, hybrid styles adopted by some white youth potentially create a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1990a) in which new radical identity positions may emerge, Pnina Werbner (1997:1) has recently asserted the need 'to ask about the *limits* of cultural hybridity ...'. Consequently I found that although the B-Boyz may be considered as 'race traitors' by many white peers, it would be wrong to view them as exemplars of anti-racist practice. Accordingly, whilst many of them were engaged in creative re-enactments of gender and ethnicity that disrupted the conventional stereotype of the 'Geordie' 'lad' or 'lass', these accounts could also reveal an adherence to a particular discourse of racism which centred on the body. I received the following response when I asked the B-Boyz if there were any advantages to being black.

[16-17 years]

Chris: Well from an athletics point of view I think that there are. They're good at most sports [...]

When it comes to sprinters, stuff like that, blacks seem more powerful.



John: There's more power thrusting you see.

Chris: The black basketball players can jump higher than the white basketballers, I dunno why, maybe they've got more explosive legs or something. Sprinting, jumping both things - explosive legs!

Suzanne: Then there are blacks who aren't that athletic at all, same as whites.

Chris: Yeah, but when you look at the athletic whites and the athletic blacks, the blacks are more athletic than the athletic whites.

Although the B-Boyz celebrated some aspects of cultural fusion, there remained a belief in a fundamental, corporeal difference between black and white bodies. As such, their comments reveal how the complex constitution of whiteness is reliant upon racialised Others. In an interesting historical shift, the contemporary belief in black athletic superiority is less about seeing blacks as subhuman and more about conveying them as superhuman. This forms a modern day example of Fanon's (1970) fear/desire couplet. Both discourses converge around biological notions of bodily difference, only in this reading it is blacks who appear the most physically evolved specimens in the Great Chain of Being. It seemed that in these accounts, the only means of interpreting black sporting achievement was through recourse to essentialism, the idea that blacks were 'naturally' endowed with superior physical qualities on account of their genetic capability. These differences were thought to be *embodied* by black subjects who were described as having explosive, power-thrusting legs which made them into majestic jumpers and lightening runners. As Bob Connell (1995:59) has argued in a study on masculinity, 'White men's masculinities, for instance, are constructed not only in relation to white women but in relation to black men'. Moreover, there is a sexual dimension to these portrayals as Brown elaborates in his studies of basketball films such as *White Men Can't Jump*, and *Grand Canyon*.

... white male desire is itself mediated through attraction to the black male body. In the social construction of desire, black masculinity is a zone of mythical sexuality that is the choice of women and the envy of the inadequate straight white male. This myth of potent sexuality - which in other contexts can threaten, panic and justify terrible violence - is coded here as another

erotic option, another form of beauty open to the privileged white male viewer (1997:108).

Richard Dyer (1997) has suggested that comments such as 'white men can't jump' are not simply about athleticism but they also have masculine reproductive connotations related to spermatozoa. Chris's earlier comments, then, resonate with a sexual envy for the mythical black body as excessive and 'hypersexual'. Instances of white youth who believed in an extreme, black, sporting superiority were not uncommon. Indeed, students of all ages mentioned the existence of numerous black athletes as 'evidence' of an imagined, intrinsic, sporting prowess.

[9-10 years]

Andrew: If you're black you'd be like Michael Jordan, and Shaquil O'Neil and Grant Hill at the same time, cos they're coloured. Coloured people have more athletic ability. Carl Lewis was black, Michael Jordan is black, Donavon Bailey [...] Colin Jackson, Chris Akabusi as well. [...]

Fern: Black people 'ave got more skill.

Andrew: More athletic ability [...] They've got more flexibility, They've got the clothes as well. They've got better athletics ability, I dunno ...

Fern: They're jus' better!

In a peculiar twist upon earlier models of racism, the claim was less about whether blacks were equal to whites but rather centred upon an imagined superior black physique. Bodily racial differences were foreground to suggest that black people had more skill, more flexibility, a higher level of athleticism and, at least in this respect, were conclusively 'better' than their white counterparts. What we find in these readings is not a stable notion of white superiority, but rather a complex interplay of sexual anxieties and desires. Stuart Hall (1993) explains these interactions and their ensuing ambiguities:

The play of identity and difference which constructs racism is powered not only by the positioning of blacks as the inferior species but also, and at the same time, by an inexpressible envy and desire; and this is something the recognition of which fundamentally *displaces* many of our hitherto stable political categories, since it implies a process of identification and otherness which is more complex than hitherto imagined (1993:255).

It is these complex styles of racism that I found were most prevalent amongst the B-Boyz subculture. Moreover, the Boyz were fixated with the black body as a 'hypersexual' source of difference, displaced in awe-struck remarks concerning superior athleticism. The dangers embedded in this discourse became apparent when strategic racialised splits were made between mind/body. The ensuing conversation concerned a discussion about the world record in long and triple jump. At the time, the long jump record was held by an American black athlete and the triple jump record was held by Britain's Jonathan Edwards, a white man. Here, sport became the arena for the interplay of racial difference:

[16-17 years]

Chris: Well the long jump's a black man, the triple jump's a white man. The triple jump's a lot to do with technique [...] Depends on what you need for the sport. Long jump is just a burst, one burst of power to push yourself. But triple jump you've got to have balance and er ...

John: You've got to measure your jump so you don't do big jumps, and then you can't do a massive one.

Even amongst the B-Boyz, the assertion of black superiority in certain sporting arenas was frequently partial and often tenuous. For the subculture, there was a clear distinction demarcating the *types* of masculine sporting prowess which blacks could be endowed with. Black sporting success is immediately related to physical differences, the muscular ability to make explosive leaps or bounds. However, white sporting success is imputed to arise because of superior 'technique' that prevails over raw power in certain situations. Furthermore, where qualities such as balance or other functions associated with the mind are required, white superiority wins out. Thus, the need to 'measure' jumps is seen to place the black athlete at a disadvantage

when s/he can no longer rely on a primitive 'burst of power' but has to calculate the point of departure. However, the embodiment of race is ultimately a contradictory position to have to occupy as Michael Hati explains.

The embodiment of race is pursued to such a degree that the person, and his selfhood is erased. The negro is reduced to the morphology of the body and no more ... Embodiment is, strangely perhaps, a dehumanising gesture. The body is not measured, probed analysed in order to animate the object of anthropology, but to petrify it in ideological rock (1992:27).

As such, the idea that blacks embodied athleticism on the basketball court or sports track was an ambivalent attribute to be burdened with. The corollary implied that they relied upon a natural brute savagery and did not have to cultivate their mental skills or hone their talents. Clearly, blacks were continually read through a bodily schema and this meant that their sporting success was rarely attributed to calculation, strategy, technique or timing - this was the mind-zone of the white man. Thus, white students frequently read sporting ability from the racialised body in a deterministic manner that froze the black individual out of subjective existence. Although there was a general appreciation of black sporting ability, more specifically black success prevailed only in certain sports. A member of the B-Boyz graphically demonstrated the bodily boundaries he felt existed between black and white athletes.

Chris (17 years): I heard somewhere that black people aren't as good swimmers for reasons like the legs I was saying, with the jump. It's all to do with jumping. I'll tell you what it is right [*puts foot on desk and rolls up trouser leg*]. The twitch muscles or whatever they are on the bottom of your legs, just below your calf muscle if you can jump higher then they're more explosive, they react quicker to what you wanna do so maybe its like that. If you've got explosive muscles down here, then you haven't got as much flexibility in yer leg as well. You can't kick as well, can't swim as well.

The so-called 'twitch' muscles that Chris goes on to demonstrate and describe in detail were 'evidence' of anatomical difference between blacks and whites. The accounts of young students indicated that these perceived differences were double-

edged. What is pertinent for anti-racists to recognise is that these opinions were pervasive amongst a number of white youth, including many who did not identify as racist and would have been justifiably offended to have been categorised as such. There was little evidence that the 'hypersexual' perception of blackness had been in any way challenged by the existing school legislation that focused on 'prejudice', racist language and direct harassment. Rather than construing the B-Boyz as racist, a more sensitive assessment would be to engage with the various points at which their whiteness was 'deconstructed', 'displaced' or 'abolished'; and those moments when it could be 'performed', 'consolidated' and 'brought into being'.

In the same way that basketball and athletics were regarded as sexualised zones of black expertise, dance and music were also seen as the cultural preserve of black folk. A similar variant of the statement, 'white men can't jump' is the equally familiar refrain 'white men can't dance'. This again was a source of displaced envy for many white youth. For example, Paul (17 years) who was an established B-Boy and an ardent hip-hop fan added, 'D'ya kna what I really hayut about blacks? They're all such good dancers!'. That Paul should 'hate' or envy blacks for their reputation as 'good dancers' hints at the insecurities of whiteness and also alludes to the way these emotions collapse into one another. Here, blacks are 'hated', desired, envied and disparaged within a complex web of white anxiety (we may recount the Tina Turner episode in Chapter 5 as a key example of this psychoanalytic interplay). This view that black people were good dancers and more adept musically than whites was echoed by young people of different ages:

[9-10 years]

Fern: Another thing is, is black peoples 'ave got more rave than English people.

Anoop: *What d'you mean? You mean black people themselves or the music?*

Fern: Like both. They've got more rave and that than the English people.

[...]

Andrew: Coloured people *look* better.

Anoop: *What d'you mean 'look better'?*

Andrew [giggling] I dunno. When they're talkin' and doin' rap, they jus' *look better!*

[...]

Fern: I think English are like quiet and coloured people are more like groovy and loud. [...] It's like a 'gift' thing.

The magical properties of blackness were then thought to be embodied by black subjects themselves as a natural 'gift'. In this reading black people are essentially 'groovy', and somehow embody 'rave' in a way that whites do not. Ultimately, the imaginary corporeal differences are seen to have a bearing on the constitution of whiteness. By over-investing in an imagined black lifestyle, white existence by contrast is seen as mundane, boring, empty. This partly explains the practices of the B-Boyz who wanted to 'escape' whiteness, however fleetingly, in a symbolic journey towards a high-tan future.

## Conclusion

The subculture of the B-Boyz along with a cohort of other 'race traitors' espoused an altogether different relationship to white cultural identity than that which was seen to emanate from the studies of Real Geordies and Charver Kids (Chapter 8). Regarded as an emergent youth group, this subculture flaunted their new ethnicities in a bid to escape whiteness. Their cultural attachments to basketball, hip-hop music and baggy clothes were seen by other youth as evidence that they were 'wiggers' or 'wannabes', modern society's contemporary White Negroes. In many respects members of the B-Boyz and their ilk were treated as white mavericks, individuals who had subverted the acceptable boundaries of white, English ethnicity. The cost of this transgression could result in prejudice and verbal abuse from others, which meant a good degree of perseverance was required on behalf of subcultural members if a 'wannabe' identity was to be publicly performed. Moreover, this social identity was increasingly difficult to sustain in the all-but-white peripheries of the North East. As such, these

renegade youth could be likened to Albino Kings: white youth who could reign over the symbolic values of black culture in the absence of a prominent black population. This void enabled the subculture to distinguish themselves as the cutting-edge pioneers of cultural syncretism.

The ethnographic analysis further revealed that a sustained engagement with black culture through the medium of dance or basketball could open up rare avenues through which white youth could come to meet other black acquaintances in Tyneside. Where such liaisons had occurred there was the possibility of forming lasting friendships with black peers as white youth gradually became educated in the learning of new urban dialogues. At the same time it was found that many supposed white renegades held highly contradictory attitudes to black people that frequently encompassed a fetishisation of the black body. These nuances indicate the variety of subject positions taken up by white youth in relation to blackness. Furthermore, they reveal the fragile nature of multi-ethnic relations in a predominantly white area wherein young people may or may not move beyond racially-loaded understandings as a consequence of syncretic youth styles. This would imply a lack of equivalence between cultural hybridity and anti-racism in the lives of young people.

In the opening chapter of our Tyneside quartet we began with a social history of the locality and explored narratives of migration and settlement in the region (Chapter 6). This chapter was the canvass upon which an ethnographic study of young peoples' white ethnicities could be sketched. In Chapter 7 the pervasive perspectives of the ethnic majority were considered along with pedagogic techniques for 'unburdening' white youth from the 'burden' of whiteness. It was argued that a critical engagement with white Anglo-ethnicity was now a necessary task for contemporary anti-racist approaches. In Chapter 8 an ethnographic study of two Tyneside subcultures known as the Real Geordies and the Charver Kids was undertaken. The ethnographic evidence indicated that intra-class differences remained pertinent in the region and moreover, these cultural distinctions were inscribed with a deeply racialised meaning. In this respect, the contours of race and

class were mapped across similar nodes of configuration as that which was previously witnessed in Chapter 1. Here, the poverty-stricken 'residuum' were found to be materially and symbolically removed from whiteness. A near-identical discursive arrangement of cultural values was used to designate the 'respectable' Real Geordies from the 'rough' Charvers. Finally, in our conclusive Tyneside chapter we have considered the role of an emergent youth subculture consisting of a cluster of white mavericks who each experimented with ethnicity in contingent and varied ways. It was argued that the making of a new cultural heritage was at stake in this complex negotiation of white ethnicity in the post-industrial city.

In the final empirical chapter we will turn our attention to the making - and 'unmaking' - of whiteness. In large part this thesis has been concerned with the cultural identities of white youth, in the following section we will extend our analysis to consider the meaning of whiteness in ten multi-ethnic<sup>165</sup> life histories. Although whiteness may have been experienced as the norm by a large section of the ethnic majority the narratives of minority students, 'race traitors' and those excluded from the higher echelons of the ethnic elite, reveal that there are other, often 'hidden' stories yet to tell. Here, whiteness was critically interrogated through the counter-narratives of marginalised respondents. The life stories provide a rare and vivid exposition of whiteness and moreover, they signal ways in which whiteness can be challenged, consolidated or torn asunder. As such, the chapter is concerned with the disclosure and negotiation of whiteness in ten multi-ethnic life histories. The use of a life-history method was especially appropriate for discussing the process of ethnic identification in participant biographies. The method will be discussed at some length before a detailed analysis of the narratives is undertaken. The underlying aim is to acquire an understanding of the *practice* of whiteness in respondents' lives. The life histories illustrate how people are positioned (and position themselves), within, against or often ambivalently in relation to discourses of whiteness. Only by painstakingly depicting the process of cultural negotiation can we arrive at a fuller comprehension of the meaning of whiteness. The narratives are drawn from

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<sup>165</sup> It is recognised that the term multi-ethnic may inadvertently imply that the lives of white youth are somehow mono-ethnic. While the term may be misleading at an academic level it is used here as a short-hand phrase to capture the diverse cultural backgrounds of respondents.



participants who live in subordinated existence to whiteness or others who have come to critically reflect on white privilege and adjust their behaviour accordingly. Such rare disclosure shows how ethnicity shapes the configuration of subjectivity and how whiteness colours the lives of all individuals. Moreover, a thorough consideration of the alternative, complex and contingent life histories may yet allude to a more meaningful engagement with whiteness and white cultural identity.

**‘Tales from the Darkside’**  
**Identifying and Negotiating Whiteness in Ten Multi-ethnic**  
**Life Histories**

**Chapter 10**

## Introduction: Unsettling the White Norm

This chapter is concerned with documenting narrative deconstructions of whiteness made by individuals whom have found themselves in a self-conscious negotiation with white ethnicity. I will begin by stressing the case for including marginalised experiences of whiteness (see Chapter 2) and then go on to describe the methodological specificities entailed in deploying a life-history method. Here, there is a shift in emphasis from a concern with groups and social collectivities to a concern with individual biographies and life stories. Even so, it is argued that the use of multiple methods enhances the overall tenure of the study and in particular lends itself to a deeper investigation of the subjective, psychic dimensions of white cultural identity. Finally, I will examine a series of narratives taken from multi-ethnic<sup>166</sup> respondents with a view to determining how we may become better informed about white cultural identity. This marks a departure from previous sections in the thesis where the predominant focus has been upon the ethnicities of white youth. In this final empirical chapter I will extend the analysis to explore the meaning of whiteness in a series of multi-ethnic life experiences. This perspective adds an important dimension to research for as Ruth Frankenberg has stated:

Whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitively excludes and to those to whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it (1994:228-229).

In this reading the experiences of those whom live in subordinated existence to whiteness is qualitatively different to those 'securely housed within its borders'. The privileged location has not only led to the consolidation of 'white' as a normative category, but has left the subject of whiteness void of critical interrogation. Thus, despite a tendency for whiteness to go unidentified, the responses of minority students

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<sup>166</sup> The study includes narratives from white-Anglo, African-Caribbean, Asian, Middle Eastern and 'mixed-heritage' people. As such, the multiplicity of white ethnicity is recognised (see Chapter 7).

and teachers may provide critical insight into naming and deconstructing the pervasive white norm (hooks, 1992).

In his classic 1920 essay 'The Souls of White Folk' the black American scholar W.E.B Du Bois claims to be 'singularly clairvoyant' on the topic. He expands upon this trenchant view of white folk:

I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. Mine is not the language of the traveler [sic.] or the colonial composite of dear memories, words and wonder ... Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know ... I see them ever stripped, - ugly, human. (Cited in Roediger 1998:184).

Like a penetrating X-ray Du Bois' gaze pierces through the fog of white identity. This symbolic disrobing of whiteness from a subordinated ethnic perspective indicates how those outside whiteness can penetrate the layers of white mystique. The implications are that whiteness is *not* as readily taken-for-granted by minority groups and those excluded from white privilege. Instead, exploring how marginalised respondents negotiate whiteness - how they internalise it, resist it, or subvert it - can provide new techniques for challenging the normative presence of the category 'white'. The approach pursues a similar line of enquiry to that advocated by feminist methodologies concerned with anti-oppressive practice, while recognising the role of subjective experience (Finch, 1984; Harding, 1987; Stanley & Wise, 1993).

This particular strand of the research analyses the narrative deconstruction of whiteness made by respondents from differing ethnic backgrounds. Whereas the majority of participants in this study have so far been defined, however problematically as 'white', this chapter aims to focus on alternative narratives to reveal an awareness of whiteness and white identity. Ethnic minority respondents were particularly sensitive to the 'workings of whiteness' in their daily lives and frequently had to organise their identities in relation to the perceptions and life-experiences of the ethnic majority. As such, these participants continually manoeuvred across a white

norm and so had to develop multiple strategies for negotiating its exigencies. The variety of techniques utilised by them incorporate individual acts of subversion and conformity, as well as processes of avoidance, resistance and negotiation. These multiple responses also imply that whiteness is a *variable* in black peoples' life experience, intersected by class, gender and sexuality. Although these respondents demonstrate considerable expertise when engaging with whiteness, this process can still incur psychological costs. However, the numerous strategies deployed in the act of negotiation reveal a remarkable potential for subversion. It is argued that the negotiation of a white norm in minority narratives of schooling may provide valuable pointers for re-thinking whiteness as 'practice'. The task that now remains is to transform individual transgressions of whiteness into a shared politic that incorporates the responses of white students (see Chapter 7). Indeed, I have included responses from a select number of white individuals who draw upon multi-ethnic affiliations and show a striking awareness of whiteness as a location of privilege or point of critique. The accounts demonstrate how 'white people' can step outside whiteness and alternatively how 'black people' may try to whiten their identities. The use of these stories is partly an attempt to move beyond black/white binaries of power, which in the previous chapter were found to be wholly problematic. Here, it is argued that these counter-narratives may shed light on the construction of white identities and also point towards ways in which whiteness can be challenged, disrupted or as I have emphasised, engaged with productively.

### **Life-History Method and Narratives of Cultural Identity**

Before moving on to examine the narratives, I would like to take this opportunity to discuss some of the motives behind using life stories and outline the problems encountered. In the previous chapters we gained an insight into how a significant majority of white working-class people felt towards whiteness and white ethnicity on Tyneside where whiteness was in large part an unspoken norm. By way of contrast, the life histories discussed in this section are remarkable accounts of ethnicity, and not least for this reason should be worthy of further investigation. While the value of such accounts may offer unusual disclosures of whiteness, anthropologists such as Pelto and Pelto (1983[1970]) have long recognised the advantages in using such a method:

in most cases, life histories represent the lives of the exceptional rather than representative or average persons in the community. In spite of this fact, the richness and personalised nature of life histories afford a vividness and integration of cultural information that are of great value for understanding particular lifeways (p.75).

In this sense, life-history method is a specialised technique that can be deployed to foreground rare testimonies, hidden histories and personal narratives that may otherwise go untold. This populist approach has an advantage over more formalised auto/biographies which invariably focus on men, the famous, or middle-class representatives at the expense of socially subordinated groups (Purvis, 1989). As the Women in Geography Study Group (1997:96) illustrate the choice of these methods is not in itself insignificant: 'Life histories/stories have been employed to allow voices often silenced by dominant discourses to be heard'. Thus, the identifiable multi-ethnic responses to whiteness in this chapter can be said to form counter-narratives that have special place in contemporary relations of racism (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Moreover, Hilary Graham has argued that narrative methods are part of a popular tradition in which 'the emphasis is on telling rather than asking' (1984:107) and as such differ from standard interviewing techniques and survey questionnaires. Significantly, story telling allows respondents to communicate the complexity of their lives and situate this within the social fabric of their daily experience. As it stands so far, the thesis combines historical approaches closely with ethnographic research. The use of life-history method in this section complements the existing analysis and, furthermore, it provides a useful addition to the literature on whiteness by exploring minority experiences.

A clear advantage of conventional life-history method lies in the development of a longitudinal approach that can account for people's changing identities in different life phases. However, for pragmatic reasons - not least that of time - this type of research is often unfeasible. Even so, it is also possible to use life-history method to access selective aspects from a person's past to see how these experiences have influenced their life and actions. The use of focused biographies is the preferred approach I have taken here, to avoid what Mandelbaum has described as the 'jumbled, often profuse

flow of data' (1982:148) frequently associated with the method. In this sense I am less concerned with plotting the rising trajectory of a life as a type of 'cannon shot' (p.150), and more interested in the social constitution of identity through narrative. This theme has been pursued by Mary Jane Kehily (1995) whose involvement in women's auto/biographical research led her to carefully reflect on the social aspects of the story-telling process. Accordingly, she discusses the tendency for certain individuals to rely on a ready-made stock of 'well-worn tales'. Furthermore, when it came to the act of story-telling, 'Parts of the narrative could be omitted, embellished, reframed and adapted for different audiences' (p.24). For Kehily this does not reduce the significance of stories in people's lives, rather it draws attention to the multiple and contingent presentations of self and identity through narrative. In this way life histories enable us to better appreciate how an individual perceives his/her identity and acknowledges the symbolic meaning people attach to specific events. Thus, where participants have included subjective reflections or evaluations on events ('this is why I'm like this now!'), these comments have also been taken into consideration. Here, data collection and interpretation become fused as the objects of social enquiry also become the active subjects who carry out data (self)analysis. An unanticipated advantage of life-history method was, then, that it enabled me to gain an insight into the psychic levels of identity formation. Life-history techniques can thus be used to reveal the 'inner' experience of individuals, to show how they interpret and define their interactions within the prevailing social environment. Such approaches have most famously been utilised by way of Frantz Fanon's psychiatric methods and Freud's prolific use of psychological case histories. The life stories of cultural identity deployed in this chapter added another layer to my understanding of whiteness; the insights stressed the importance of psychic processes to the formation of subjectivity. Here, the process of story telling (how narratives are constructed, their social meaning, the points of identification that arise etc.) became an integral means for understanding the production of identity through these social forms.

A drawback of using popular life stories remains an over-reliance on individual testimonies and the limited means for 'triangulating' data (see Chapter 3). Instead, it may be more appropriate to treat narratives as 'moments of being' that have particular resonance for the individuals concerned. As such, careful attention should be paid to the contingency of accounts (whether written or spoken) and the strategic meanings

that may arise within the context of a highly particular piece of research on ethnicity. Even so, I found that many of the stories from ethnic minority respondents were similar to childhood experiences I too had undergone. That our experiences should chime together in this way may hold some loose, collective significance. As further life stories came my way the peculiar constellations that emerged encouraged me to become increasingly open-minded to patterns of shared experience. This is not to take an essentialist approach to black subjectivity that implies all minority groups have the same experience of oppression, but rather to show an appreciation of common threads of mutual subordination. Finally, discourse analysis was utilised to distil accounts, identify themes and organise the data.

Here, it is important to be open to the act of data interpretation as a social act that does not preclude the possibility of further insights. As Ken Plummer has shown, life histories are essentially concerned with the personal and subjective and thereby make light of the notion that through them 'one has trapped the bedrock of truth' (1983:14). Stories are then endowed with layers of meaning and in Roland Barthes' (1977:79) words can be likened to 'storeys'. Similarly, in her analysis of auto/biographic accounts Liz Stanley (1990) openly acknowledges the multiple positions researchers may take up in relation to their data. Instead of undercutting the evidence, she argues that an appreciation of multiplicity is in itself an important self-reflexive technique that social scientists should embrace. As discussed in Chapter 3, Stanley uses the metaphor of a 'kaleidoscope' to capture the mobile and fractured configurations that may arise when we examine our data. She maintains how, 'in even one person's life there are autobiographies: there is no "complete" view which adds up to "the real X or Y" because there is no such thing' (p.21). Thus, instead of encountering a real X we are left with a series of Xs. In this sense how we view a person's life story, our own changing perceptions regarding self-presentation and where we stand in relation to their individual biographies have a great degree of influence on our final interpretations. The Personal Narratives Group (1989) have highlighted the different forms of narrative analysis that can be undertaken. In this reading different narrative methods may in turn give way to a spectrum of meaning as the Group recall:



[C]ontext, narrative form, narrator-interpreter relations - provide a different lens through which to view a life story. Each lens refracted the life form from a different angle of vision. As we view the complexity of images arising from these multiple perspectives, we questioned what it was we were seeing ... 'Truths'. (1989:13-14).

In the light of these recent post-structuralist arguments, I have become much less concerned with ascertaining the 'validity' of a story and much more interested in the formation of identity through narrative.

The life histories in this chapter relate to ethnicity and the negotiation of whiteness. The qualitative data combines oral life histories with written narrative accounts. One of the great benefits of drawing upon written narratives is that they form a highly practical and economic means of data gathering. To begin with, the researcher need not necessarily be present when stories are constructed, though s/he no doubt may appear at an 'imaginary' level for the respondent as a type of 'mythic' audience figure, the imagined academic community. Where written narratives are collected there is no need for transcription and this advantage cannot be underestimated for the ethnographer as it allowed me to continue to gather and analyse data right up until the final stages<sup>167</sup>. Furthermore, while it is seldom admitted, the act of verbal transcription invariably involves some loss of data, misrepresentation or an inability to catch particular words. The use of written material has an advantage here, although some clarification may be sought if the handwriting is particularly illegible! While conversational transcription involves translation and the supplementary use of punctuation, I tended to use the grammar and form deployed by respondents in the written stories. Of course, these testimonies are also mediated forms of experience, though in this case the respondent may feel a greater degree of control in the production of data when it comes to editing, selecting and relaying information. The author also has the advantage of having time for reflection whereby s/he can retrospectively edit the material, alter the tone, or simply erase portions of the text. The social act of story telling may enact a shift towards what Graham describes as a format based on 'informant-structured interviews' (1984:118). While some researchers may regard the facility as a drawback, I would suggest that it allows respondents a

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<sup>167</sup> The stories were collected over a prolonged time period and have in part been analysed elsewhere (Nayak, 1992; 1993a; 1997). What follows is a more extensive study as subjects' life histories which comprise multifaceted experiences with numerous dimensions.

greater degree of control over the formation of their data and affords them a better means of protection. This is not to imply that those who supplied written accounts were beyond a politics of representation structured through the unequal power dynamic of researcher/researched. Indeed, a concern remains that these methods may provide subjects with the illusion of control when ultimately it is the researcher who is the absent authorial voice in the text with the final word - though in the end this is probably left with the reader (Barthes, 1977).

At the same time there are certain advantages to using oral histories when compared with written narratives. Here, the ethnographer has the opportunity to observe the participant and context first-hand; there is greater scope to direct the discussion; probing questions can be used to try new lines of enquiry or to follow up information; taped transcription allows the researcher to capture accents or speech mannerisms which may be dropped when most writers feel compelled to employ the standard English vernacular. Overall, a consideration of these issues through the use of multiple methods (ethnography, life history, biography, group and individual interview) may encourage the researcher to interpret his/her data as socially constructed artefacts. Not least for these reasons I found life-history method an invaluable technique that could be incorporated as a further strand within the ethnography. Life-history method may also highlight the specificities of the sometimes taken-for-granted space of the immediate context by referring to the respondent's activities in a number of social spheres. A narrative approach is unusual for school-based studies and Connell's (1989:292) work on masculinities confirmed that '[r]esearch on schooling is usually confined to schooling, and thus has difficulty seeing where the school is located in a larger process'. By contrast Connell's work utilised 'life-history interviews with adults that cover family, workplace, sexual relationships, friendships and politics' in a penetrative multi-dimensional analysis. The focus on life-histories of schooling and growing up is therefore particularly fruitful for research exploring the narrative positioning of identity and my concern with the variety of subject positions that respondents take up when negotiating whiteness.

### *The participant sample*

The fact is 'black' has never been just there ... It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found. (Hall, 1987:45).

In the same way that the cultural critic Stuart Hall writes about blackness, it seems to me that whiteness, likewise, can be understood in terms of a story or narrative. Indeed, in Chapter 1 the history of how the British social classes became white emerges as a sequential vignette in what is an on-going tale. As we shall now find personal narratives of whiteness are themselves unstable and constructed in the psychic and cultural ways Hall has chosen to describe blackness.

This chapter on whiteness focuses on selected fragments drawn from ten in-depth written and spoken life histories with participants of differing ethnic backgrounds. The participant sample was mixed in terms of age, gender and class. Where appropriate, individuals are introduced with reference to these social locations in order to provide a suitable context for interpreting their life-history accounts. A breakdown of the ethnicity of respondents is as follows<sup>168</sup>: Meena Kumar, a British born Asian from the Northwest of England; Sabina Choudhury of 'mixed-heritage' background, with a white, Irish mother and an Indian father; Sunil Sharma an Asian male, born in India but raised on Merseyside, England; Tina Hussain a student-teacher of Middle Eastern parentage who resided in a small town in the West Midlands; Helena Foster a white female who grew up in Norway with a 'Geordie', English father and a Scandinavian mother; Nathan Curtis who was raised by his white mother in Northeast England and has a Pakistani father; Amerjit Singh an Indian Sikh who had grown up in inner-city districts of London and Birmingham; Adrian Hunter who is of white, English descent having grown up in a multi-ethnic urban district in Britain, but now resides in Japan; Naomi Milton who is of African-Caribbean descent and lives in the English Midlands; Satpal Verdi, a British, Indian Sikh who lived in Northern England but moved with his parents to the West Midlands conurbation of Birmingham. Of this

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<sup>168</sup> Where possible I have used the subjective forms of identification provided by the respondents.

sample Naomi Milton, Amerjit Singh, Adrian Hunter, Tina Hussain<sup>169</sup> and Sabina Choudhury were all teachers, while Sunil Sharma, Nathan Curtis, Helena Foster, Satpal Verdi and Meena Kumar were Sixth Form or Higher Education students. With the exception of Naomi and Adrian who were older, all respondents were between their late teens and mid-twenties at the time of research.

I gained access to many of the respondents through a prior knowledge of them. Others were contacted through the established technique of 'snow-balling' or via individuals encountered in other social settings. Where interviews were undertaken this occurred either in my house or in places where the respondent felt at ease. I knew some of the participants quite well before the research and remain in close contact with more than half of them. Rather than detracting from the findings, I found this familiarity allowed me to place their accounts alongside my existing biographical knowledge of them, an approach in keeping with the ethnographic practice developed throughout the study. In some cases this longitudinal dimension could be an advantage as I gained a deeper understanding of the individual concerned. However, it did not eradicate the element of surprise: all participants told stories that I had never heard, and in at least one case I had imagined a completely different set of narratives would emerge as we had jointly experienced episodes of violent racist abuse together. That this did not occur gave me a deeper appreciation for the social construction of narrative and made me more aware of how we may prioritise particular stories in certain instances and reveal others only under different circumstances. The emphasis on the mundane over the spectacular - and how this was conveyed as 'significant' - became a lasting feature of life-history accounts. Nevertheless, the stories retained a strong flavour of what William Labov (1972) calls 'tellability'.

Participants were given the choice of being involved in open-ended interviews, speaking into a tape recorder without the researcher present (an option that was not taken up), or providing written narrative accounts. Four of the ten respondents were directly interviewed for their life stories (Naomi, Satpal, Sabina, Helena) and an equal number chose to provide written narrative material (Meena, Nathan, Amerjit, Sunil) including an additional set of narratives sent by e-mail (Adrian). The one remaining

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<sup>169</sup> At the time of writing Tina had secured a post in a Secondary School and was about to embark upon a full-time career in teaching.

member engaged in a life-history interview and also produced a short, written biography (Tina). The different methods of articulation highlight the contingency of life histories. Here, narrative order can be understood as culturally constructed, 'an accomplishment of tellers, hearers, writers and readers' (Atkinson, 1990). Attitudes to the chosen mode of self-presentation varied. Naomi insisted that if she had engaged in written accounts she would never have expressed so much, while Sunil was adamant that writing encouraged him to expose inner feelings never revealed before. Offering participants the opportunity to choose pseudonyms and a style of public self-presentation they felt comfortable with represented a small attempt to empower respondents beyond the confines of most research situations<sup>170</sup>.

All of the participants were asked to relate stories about growing up. Respondents who preferred to give oral testimonies were encouraged to speak at length with few interruptions from the interviewer aside from the need for further clarification. Prior knowledge of many of the respondents enabled this minimalist approach to be adopted and acted as confirmation of the tacit knowledge held by respondents. Those who provided written accounts were also given a concise brief. Here, respondents were asked to think of moments when they felt like an 'outsider'. This open-ended approach aimed to avoid an assumption that ethnicity is privileged as the key signifier of difference. At this stage a conscious attempt was made to avoid eliciting responses to support pre-given theoretical assumptions. Indeed, life-history method provides a very different picture to conventional quantitative analysis in so far as it is willing to embrace the colourful fabric of grounded experiences. As such, the approach places an emphasis on biographical details and the rich textures of participants' life paths. The advantages of examining cultural identity in this way were discussed by one respondent who wrote:

Sunil: I understand that the phenomenon for ethnics [sic.] in Britain to feel alienated is not an original theme but more personal experiences can give a more realistic picture to the everyday difficulties and isolation we feel.

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<sup>170</sup> I recognise that these options do little to alter the imbalance of power in social science research and am cognisant of the unequal positions that researcher/researched invariably occupy.

The strengths of these multiple life-history methods lie in allowing respondents to feel at ease, and in facilitating the production of some fine-grain qualitative data.

### **The Narrative Disclosure of Whiteness**

Racial and cultural identity that is not simply assimilatory must be strategically reactive ... Furthermore, it entails a strategic comprehension of the fractures, disjunctions, and intersections of “whiteness” ... Puar (1995:27).

In this section I will focus upon the prevalence of a white norm within ethnic minority accounts of schooling and draw attention to the ways in which white exclusion is negotiated. The life histories vividly expose the privilege of whiteness in daily interactions and show how this can have a profoundly debilitating effect on the lives of black students. Meena Kumar, a 22-year-old British born Asian, clearly remembers the discomfort of having to negotiate whiteness on a daily basis. She writes with humour and pain of her experiences whilst auditioning for a school musical in an all girls’ school.

Meena: Hilman School were putting on the musical *Alice in Wonderland*, and everyone was auditioning to be Alice - ‘Why they could always find you a blonde wig if need be’, all the girls in my class were saying, but I thought, ‘Who’d ever heard of an Asian Alice?’

I auditioned for the part anyway accompanied by the sniggers and whispers of girls in the years above, ‘Imagine if Meena was Alice’.

Rationally I thought you should give the public what they want - the Genuine Article. My theory was proved correct when Sandy Silworth a fifth year was chosen for the part. She was 5’ 9”, Blonde shoulder length hair, Blue eyes - Well I thought, the Blonde wig probably wouldn’t have suited me anyhow.

Meena’s narrative about *Alice in Wonderland* exposes the ‘norm’ of the young white heroine, as an identifiable trope she feels consciously excluded from. Her colour is remarked upon by other students as an obvious barrier to achieving the star part, a contradiction that Meena herself acknowledges, ‘Who’d ever heard of an Asian Alice?’ Despite her misgivings Meena auditions for the part but experiences

inevitable difficulties in trying to insert herself within a *pre-determined* white subject position<sup>171</sup>. The mythology of the Western fairy tale that equates white femininity with having blonde hair and blue eyes is expressed in Meena's description of bloneness as what the public want: 'the Genuine Article'. Here, white femininity can become a site for cultural struggle. As Ware (1993:4) elaborates, 'the construction of white femininity - that is the different ideas about what it means to be a white female - can play a pivotal role in negotiating and maintaining concepts of racial and cultural difference'. Meena's willingness to audition for Alice represents an attempt to insert herself into this discourse of whiteness. However, the reference to being 'Genuine' intimates that blue-eyed bloneness is a 'pure' style of white femininity, that no simple wig can compensate for. This implies a hierarchy of femininities, that reifies white credentials since, "[p]ure" whiteness is imagined as something that is both external and internal ... has actual value, like legal tender' compared with blackness, which remains 'like a counterfeit bill that is passed into circulation, but may be withdrawn at any point if discovered ...' (Mullen 1994:80). Meena's narrative reveals the assumptions and dominance of a white culture that seeks to authenticate its 'racial' specificity in the mythic imaginary of folk-lore, song and story telling.

The prevalence of a white norm was also apparent in Sunil Sharma's narratives of schooling. Sunil was born in India and came to Britain as a young child. He is in his mid-twenties and clearly recalls negotiating whiteness from an early age.

Sunil: My account starts when I was at primary school. Living in a white middle class area in the early '70s and still possessing the naive innocence of youth I was oblivious of my differences from my white friends. I was the same as all the others, cute, cheeky, full of energy and the most important things in life being toys and sweets and no other worries.

My first memory of being different is still clearly visible, it hit me like a slap across the face.

The teacher asked us to bring in photographs of when we were babies i.e. when we all had the same nascent features, round full cheeked faces, little hair and WHITE - and then we would have a really good game trying to identify each other. I didn't bring in a photograph, I said I had lost it. I joined in the fun and games, it was a good game but

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<sup>171</sup> Bendersky (1995:136) has claimed that metaphors of bloneness, until recently tainted by associations with the Nazi cult of Aryanism, are once again becoming fashionable and linked to ideals of whiteness.

inwardly I felt different - no better, no worse but different and at that age it can be traumatic and difficult to grasp.

I kept thinking how could the teacher do that to me?  
Was he insensitive, was he unaware?  
Could he be to blame?

I felt as though I was painted in fluorescent orange such was my feeling of difference. At that stage it was a temporary feeling, little was I to know that the repercussions to follow would be more serious.

Sunil's narrative account explores many of the themes raised by Meena Kumar. Each of the school tales display black students' positioning in relation to a white norm. The narratives demonstrate that while minority students may live in harmony with their peers, they are strategically engaging with processes of whiteness, in ways frequently unrecognised by white students and teachers. Sunil recounts how being directly positioned by the assumption of whiteness was a dramatic episode 'still clearly visible' that 'hit me like a slap in the face'. The metaphor suggests a rude awakening, a transition from 'the naive innocence of youth' to becoming a racially conscious subject. Significantly, participants concede the inevitable dominance of whiteness: Meena commented how she could understand a need to give the public what they wanted, Sunil also acknowledges that guessing baby photographs 'was a good game'.

Despite these concessions, Sunil and Meena are able to pinpoint the assumption of whiteness through a critical subjective engagement with its oppressive signification. They are also highly imaginative in creating and negotiating other levels of participation: Meena toys with the idea of a blonde wig, Sunil pretends he has lost his photograph so he can join in the identification game without further embarrassment. The manoeuvrings are not a passive compliance with white norms, but rather offer moments of subversion, and bring into play what Jasbir Puar (1995) has recently described as an 'oppositionally active' identity.

Perhaps second generation South Asians learn not about whiteness but about the different constructions of whiteness and their points of intersection. Being from a subordinate position necessitates strategizing to maximise the benefits of this knowledge. Oppositionally active whiteness is about manipulating the 'terror of whiteness', changing the oppressive discourses of whiteness to



discourses of subversion and power, and breaking down oppressor/oppressed dichotomies (p.28).

The narratives of schooling provided by Meena and Sunil indicate how they can expose the norm of whiteness and, at given moments, subvert it. These interactions are strategies that open up spaces for multi-ethnic participation in white discourses.

Another example of the strategic manipulation of whiteness was found when Amerjit Singh wrote about his desires for acceptance in a mainly-white Primary School. He too had quickly learned techniques for negotiating whiteness in school arenas:

Amerjit: Every morning we prayed at school and I learnt 'The Lords Prayer' off by heart and already I was beginning to show signs of valuing the school ethos more than what I was learning at home. When asked about what I ate at home I was too embarrassed to say the word 'chappati' because now those Punjabi words began to take on negative connotations in the playground. Answering 'fish and chips' often stopped short any more questions about my home life and allowed me to concentrate on assimilating into the system. However I was fighting a losing battle because my skin colour and my hairstyle (I had my hair tied up in a plait and later a bun so that I endured chants of 'banana head', 'handbag head', 'apple head', 'William Tell' etc.) always problematised my desire to be English and 'problem free'. I wanted to fit in with other boys; boys who were white and had ordinary hairstyles.

Like Sunil and Meena, Amerjit feared being singled out as different. He recognised that camouflaging his ethnicity was an almost impossible task as attention would invariably be drawn to his skin colour and turban as signifiers of racial difference. His fear of accentuating this difference by alluding to Indian home-cooking is seen in an unwillingness to disclose that he eats chappatis at home. Indeed, the very phrase appeared to have become a 'dirty' word in his imagination, a term of acute 'embarrassment' that could quickly result in playground abuse. In the same way that Sunil pretended to 'lose' a photograph in order to seek inclusion, Amerjit masks his difference by claiming to eat fish and chips. Each of these episodes were revealing of the imaginative negotiation of whiteness by black students. The desire to 'fit in' and avoid the 'negative connotations' attributed to Asian culture become soon-established routines in the life histories of these individuals. However, the overbearing normalcy of whiteness can make these negotiations appear 'a losing battle' when skin colour or religious symbols can be evoked as key markers of ethnic differentiation. In contrast,

white British culture, in the form of the 'Lord's Prayer' or 'fish and chips', was made to appear neutral and 'problem free'. As such whiteness is an unmarked category where 'boys who were white' ultimately 'had ordinary hairstyles'. It is the apparent 'ordinariness' of whiteness that allows it to go unperceived, notably when black students may have to make various cultural sacrifices to 'assimilate into the system'.

Ethnic minority students invariably appeared to be weighted with a racial burden of representation. An example of this can be found when Meena provides another example of negotiation, carving out a strategic niche to manipulate the 'terror of whiteness'. The episode took place when a classmate was reading aloud from the book *To Kill A Mocking Bird*.

Meena: Everything was going fine I was really enjoying it, until she was reading out the word Nigger. She hesitated before saying it obviously thinking it would offend me, said it quietly, then stopped and looked over at me before carrying on due to prompting by the English teacher. As a response I felt the whole class looking at me, just that one glance by the 30 of them was enough to place me in total isolation in a world all of my own.

From then on I dreaded English lessons with that book, and read it by myself in the library a week later, not under the glaring eyes of my year.

Meena tries to handle the dread of English lessons by reading the book outside of the class. She explains how silence by whites who avoid the topic of 'race' for fear of upsetting black friends, can cause a strain on relationships. Sunil similarly recounts that, 'Even with close white friends the topic of race is often taboo, they have difficulty saying paki, nigger, etc and in an effort to compensate I may make fun of my colour to which I may receive nervous laughter'. This strategy of parody is an attempt to deal with white unease, a reassuring gesture that ethnicity is a point of *negotiable* difference. It is also evidence of how black respondents can position themselves within discourses of whiteness, and in so doing, *transform* these modes of 'Othering'. Sunil can take pleasure in self-parody, while Meena wrote that *To Kill A Mocking Bird* 'is one of my favourite books still, but it was made so hard for me to enjoy'. By reading school books alone, making jokes to overcome white uncertainty, or claiming to eat fish and chips minority respondents are creating individual coping strategies to untangle the subtleties of whiteness: the silences, hesitations and nervous laughter.

Although minority students are, by and large, interacting across structures of difference with much skill and few complications, this is not to say that living with dominant styles of whiteness is easy. Sunil is aware of using compensatory devices of humour to erase white unease. He compares his first feelings of difference to being slapped across the face. The psychic dynamics of his lived experience have left a permanent trace on his memory when he indicates that becoming 'racially' aware meant 'the repercussions to follow would be more serious'. Another feature of each of the narrative styles is the internal questioning that runs alongside the story-telling format. Sunil notes how he felt 'inwardly' different and admits that the realisation of this 'can be traumatic and difficult to grasp'. This leads to an internal debate as he wonders 'how could the teacher do that to me?', before questioning the tutor's sensitivity and finally wondering if it was really his fault after all. Such a sequence of questioning and self-doubt was also found in Meena's story, 'I thought "Who'd ever heard of an Asian Alice?"' Sunil compares the level of perceived difference to being 'painted in fluorescent orange', Amerjit recalls the desire to be 'problem free' and Meena writes about 'that one glance' that makes English lessons a source of morbid terror. Each of these comments accentuates the social and psychic dimensions of living against a white norm.

### **White Mythologies of Black Uniqueness**

I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed. Having readjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare. Frantz Fanon (1993:224).

A recurrent feature in ethnic minority narratives of schooling is a feeling of being continually positioned by 'racial' discourse and an expectation to play particular roles. As Fanon indicates these roles are about fixing blackness in the white imagination, the way 'a chemical solution is fixed by a dye' (p.220). The parameters of what it means to be black, and subsequently what it means to be white, are marked out through a practice of differentiation. This process of demarcation secures blackness as a 'racial' and ethnic identity, while simultaneously permitting the mystique of whiteness as a de-racialised, un-thought-out category to continue (Jeater, 1992). In this section we shall

explore how blackness may become fixed in the white imagination as exotic and different, and reveal the impact that this has upon the individuals concerned.

During a tape-recorded life-history interview, Naomi, who worked as a school teacher, discussed the difficulties that arose when white colleagues 'racialised' her role. She was told by a woman headteacher that she would be a good appointment since she would 'be able to knock chips off shoulders'.

Naomi: It wasn't a good start because I objected to her seeing me as having a specific role because I was different to any other teachers. I was the only black teacher on the staff, therefore I had this particular role.

I just think that people all have, they all see you as unique. I don't mean that in a complimentary sense; unique in the sense that if you're a black person you'll have done some specific things to get to that stage, or not done specific things. And this business of uniqueness, which I didn't find flatterin' at all, made me angry. It meant that you couldn't go through the normal processes of life without this bloody label of uniqueness. I always remember my current Head describing me as 'There aren't many like Naomi', thinkin' she was being complimentary. Can you believe it?

She saw it as a wonderful appointment because I would bring rhythm to the school. It's these strange notions that people have about your ability or these 'unique talents' that you have that I found very difficult to cope with when I trained to be a teacher. Yes, I would see myself as having skills to be able to help, I would have an insight into the way black people think and aspire and so on. I could accept those sort of labels, if you like, but you also had to have this sort of ... you were apart from whichever group you joined, you weren't allowed to play the game with the team. You had to be either winning it for the whole team or having to have some sort of uniqueness that other people didn't have. And I got fed up of being unique! I mean I play the piano, and I still get this, 'Oh you are unique!' Because I work hard at what I do it's something that perhaps, it's not expected of any of us to do, and so you're sort of treated like a person with two heads or someone with a disability almost.

In this fascinating account Naomi addresses the problematic of a politics of differentiation which situates blackness as 'unique'. In such circumstances 'uniqueness' can become a 'disability'. The problem lies in the constraining dichotomy that positions Naomi beyond the white norm, as the sub-human impossible Other, 'You had to be either winning it for the whole team or having to have some sort of uniqueness that other people didn't have'. In other words, Naomi feels she could never really be accepted on her own terms, as she is continually endowed with 'magical' qualities of blackness that set her apart. In this context the 'bloody label of uniqueness' becomes an unmanageable burden, the flip-side of being a 'two headed'

monstrous, black Other. Existing as a 'wonderful appointment' who could 'bring rhythm to the school' entails being subject to a narrative of the exotic produced by the white imaginary.

Naomi: You're never allowed to be anything other than black. I hope you follow what I mean ... you're a woman, you're also a person, you're a human being, but you're just *black* which is something you have no control over. You are black and there are certain things that black people do aren't there? Have rhythm! It was quite depressing, almost not worth botherin' to have a C.V. I could have wiggled into the room and limboed on the table and got the job!

The diversity of black experience is condensed in the stereotypical image of the rhythmic, wiggling, limboing African who knocks chips of shoulders. The specificity of this stereotype combines Africa with the jungle and transposes this onto the experience of black British communities (see Chapter 7). Naomi's narration makes it clear that the 'uniqueness' of blackness is made intelligible through the projections and practice of whiteness. Her account demonstrates how the skills or techniques she may have acquired are projected onto the surface of the black body and regarded as an intrinsic form of blackness. When Naomi confounds white conceptions, for example when it comes to light that she can play the piano, this is tainted with the implicitly racialised label of 'uniqueness'. Moreover, being a teacher, a woman, a pianist becomes irrelevant when 'You're never allowed to be anything other than black'. Here, the burden of blackness can become an over-determining experience, colouring every aspect of a person's life history<sup>172</sup>. In contrast, whites are seen as individuals who seldom have to relinquish the privilege of having their ethnicity placed before every thought and deed.

Naomi's experiences of being seen as the *embodiment* of blackness did not escape other narrative accounts. Sunil vividly writes about white fixation with the black body.

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<sup>172</sup> Mary Jane Kehily (1995) found that gender could have an over-determining influence when it came to shaping participant stories for a women's gender and sexuality group at the Department of Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham. Her research emphasises the social construction of identity through the act of story-telling.

Sunil: As I grew older I became increasingly aware of my difference - my pubescent to mid/late teens must have been the most difficult. Of course I was subjected to racial abuse at times.

Sports was a compulsory part of the school curriculum. I was a good athlete, some 'natural' talent but mainly through hard training, I was expected to win the 100 metres sprint, there was surprise from my friends and teachers when I didn't. The black stereotype of being an exemplary sportsman was already established. I was compelled/pressurised to conform to be a good black athlete. To confirm this, when I was competing in the shot-put against larger competitors I won. The teacher's remark to this was 'Black Magic', this went down a great laugh with all the students. I didn't find it very amusing.

The narrative exposes how whiteness defines itself by locating a mythological black Other. From Sunil's viewpoint the burden of 'uniqueness' is once more onerous where he feels pressurised into being a successful black athlete, yet surprises his friends and teachers when he fails to win. Being seen as an 'exemplary sportsman' becomes an impossible standard to live up to: if you lose there is surprise, if you win you embody the myth of blackness. The story taps into Naomi's experiences of feeling that 'you weren't allowed to play the game with the whole team'; winning becomes an individual experience put down to 'uniqueness'. Naomi's recognition that 'you were apart from whichever group you joined' is echoed in Sunil's narrative when the teacher and students end up laughing at him. Sunil's success is not accorded to 'hard training' but seen as a 'natural' essence he embodies, pure 'Black Magic'. Once more, the 'uniqueness' or 'magic' is a 'racial' quality that black people are thought to be biologically endowed with. Although white fantasies exoticise blackness as 'special' and capable of the unexpected, 'Black Magic' remains mysteriously evil, forever weird. The intense feelings of difference this creates are encapsulated in the respondents' linguistic emphasis via capital letters and underlining: 'the Genuine article', Blonde, Blue eyes, Nigger, 'WHITE', 'Black Magic'.

Noticeably, each of the accounts gives reference to white fantasies of the black body. Naomi is viewed as 'rhythmic', while Sunil is imagined as the 'hypersexual' black man, capable of superhuman performances. Sunil's dark complexion combined with his status as a proficient fighter and rugby team player locates him within alternative racist modes. It allows him to vacate the stereotype of the 'puny' Asian in order to occupy the black 'macho' stereotype normally ascribed to African-Caribbeans. In a sense, he feels compelled to comply with the 'exaggerated phallogentric' image Sewell

(1997:xiv) claims is especially reserved for African-Caribbean masculinities. Here, the black body becomes a repository for white fear and desire, a fetishistic site of ambivalence. Indeed, there appeared an undeniable assertion of black difference when it came to expectations of behaviour, lifestyle and bodily performance. These more subtle modes of 'othering' are complicit with what Martin Barker (1981) has called the 'New' Racism, based not on a biological belief in white supremacy, but an investment in the 'natural' incompatibility of cultures marked across ethnic lines of differentiation. Conceptualising whiteness as an identity dislocated from time or place, with no obvious history or geography to speak of, serves only to further the development of such complex racisms.

The theme of colonial fantasy and bodily desire that Sunil and Naomi had alluded to were most poignantly registered in the anguished accounts of white participants. Adrian was a white, middle-class male who had grown up in the 1970s in a multi-ethnic urban quarter of Britain. His narratives showed a self-deprecating awareness of white ethnicity which he recognises through a youthful, personal investment in black style, culture and the bodily ascription of 'otherness'. Although Adrian was knowingly critical of his early attraction to exotic, strong, black females, his stories captured the corporeal dimensions of racial longing. He painfully wrote of his pre-pubescent desire for Chantel Hope, a black girl who was in her early teens:

Adrian: Chantel Hope ... hung out in a gang of about three or four black girls of her own age [13-14], had boyfriends I heard, looked the absolute business, tall with a big, big, afro; long, black suede boots, mini-skirt, lots of make-up. And she came over real tough, strong and self-possessed with all the moves and the slick talk and the sucking of air through her teeth in annoyance. She had 'sass' by the bucketful to coin a phrase. I was really taken with her in a big way. But I was dead scared of her. She absolutely terrified me and fascinated me at the same time. She was blackness all bound up with sex and confidence, or the other way round perhaps, but anyway the two seemed to come as one package. This was my first encounter with a black person that was all mixed up with a rivetingly strong sense of heterosexual attraction. I think I was both attracted and scared of her combination of both blackness and strong female sexuality. I don't think one or the other was more important to me. It was the sudden new combination of the two that was so overwhelming.

She was a completely different world, and I would watch her on the dance floor – she could dance like hell as well, of course – for hours. I wasn't much of a dancer in those days [...] just occasionally I would find myself dancing in front of Chantel, which was a complete nightmare for me. I didn't have the gear or the moves and I was deeply ashamed of myself. I think she knew how I felt about her and she was never

dismissive of me, but I always got the feeling she was looking at me and saying, 'Come on boy, show me what you've got'. Which was not a lot in that context I began to realise, much to my disappointment.

This was another arena in which I began to sense my whiteness as something that distinguished me from my friends, something that kept me from participating in their world fully, and this time, something that was not caused by the racism of others, but by a lack in myself, something I didn't quite have.

The narrative forms a good example of what Wendy Hollway has called the 'discursive production of desire' (see Henriques *et.al.* 1998). Here, desired objects - and how they come to be signified in the imaginary - are endowed with a cultural appeal that has little to do in actuality with what is assumed to be a 'male sex drive'. According to Adrian, much of his attraction for Chantel stemmed from the 'sass' he felt she embodied. At a corporeal level this was signified through a number of tropes: the 'big, big afro', the 'slick talk', the 'sucking of air through teeth', having 'all the moves', and the ability to 'dance like hell'. The descriptive details are read back through an invisible barcode of whiteness, tagged onto the black body, to produce the subject as Other: 'a completely different world'. Here, corporeal styles such as the afro or kissing of teeth are imaginatively replayed and come to have wider cultural meanings associated with racial difference. The Fanonian *fear/desire* couplet is revisited once again, in what Adrian admits is a curious compound that 'terrified me and fascinated me at the same time'. Thus, while Chantel simultaneously provides a 'rivetingly strong' sense of attraction, dancing with her is also described as a 'nightmare'. The source of this anxiety rests partly with the bringing to the surface of adolescent insecurities; 'I didn't have the gear, or the moves and I was deeply ashamed of myself'. It is also allied to the intense disclosure of white ethnicity in these heightened dialogues with 'otherness' and the feeling that it was this that stopped Adrian from 'participating in the world fully'. In this context at least, whiteness appears an undesirable space to occupy.

If Chantel is the body of excess with 'lots of make-up', 'long, black suede boots', a 'big, big afro' and an ability (imagined or real) to dance *like hell* 'for hours', then this in turn can come to convey the hollowness of white ethnicity. In contrast, Adrian endured a creeping realisation that in the erotically charged sphere of music, style and



dance, what white identity had to offer was sadly disappointing. The phallic 'let down' that is white ethnicity becomes akin to a form of impotency; when asked to 'show me what you've got', the answer is a flaccid, and rather English, 'not very much'. The construction of a 'hypersexual' black Other, may, then, draw attention to white ethnicity as a pale imitation, inadequate, limp and defeated. Ultimately, the exposure of white masculinity reveals a blank space for Adrian, 'a lack in myself, something I didn't quite have', which is in marked contrast to the "sass" by the bucketful' that Chantel Hope comes to embody. As he notes, this causes a deep sense of shame and frustration and a fleeting awareness of the emptiness that is white ethnicity. Where Chantel appears a sexual directory of 'knowingness', a 'package' of 'sex and confidence', Adrian is left feeling bereft with no 'moves', sexual or otherwise, to offer. In this particular story, white masculinity is revealed as a hollow promise, a turgid symbol underscored by a sense of its own feebleness.

Elsewhere, Adrian described his identity as a 'rather pallid middle class self'. This perception of white, middle-class masculinity as feeble extended into other written accounts. Nevertheless, Adrian was able to identify the 'discursive production of desire' as he reflected on a romantic longing he felt towards a young Asian woman. In this extract a particular white, English masculinity was called into question:

Adrian: Maybe it was possible for a right on, sensitive kind of white guy, one who understood the difficulties of [being] involved, to have a relationship with an Asian woman. This was, certainly at one level, a rather puny, thin, (over) intellectually mediated kind of desire [...].

In his encounters with racialised Others, Adrian perceives his whiteness as 'pallid', 'puny', 'sensitive', 'thin' and intellectually driven. Here, white identity, far from being powerful, is constructed as weedy, fragile and impotent. This is a far cry from the 'imaginary unity' many male biographies are endowed with as identified by David Jackson (1990). Of course, Adrian is writing about a certain type of 'sensitive', white identity that hopes to make 'right on' links with the Other. This self-conscious, English, middle-class masculinity represents a highly particular version of whiteness associated with left-wing politics and student radicalism. Indeed, the qualitatively varied experiences of whiteness may provide further points of departure for comprehending the multiple hues of white identity. In Adrian's brave and rare

disclosure of white ethnicity, he concluded with this written vignette: 'By the way, my entire life hasn't been marked with futile crushes on black and Asian women. That would be very pathetic'. While the fear of feeling 'pathetic' or 'futile' may be one of the costs of interrogating white masculinity, I would maintain that positive engagements with ascendant categories of identity (masculinity, heterosexuality, whiteness) are of critical value. In the case of Adrian's narrative the power inhabited by ethnic majorities - here, a white, middle class, heterosexual male - is neither omnipotent nor universal. Secondly, it shows that in particular contexts and situations, whiteness can be brought into reckoning. This evaluation may encourage others to relinquish white credentials and move to new-found critiques of its social worth. Indeed, if young people come to regard whiteness as a social leash on pleasure and enjoyment they may come to reconsider automatic enrolment into the white club of privilege. This does not mean that 'acting black' is the only available option, rather, it implies a critical appreciation of difference in the search for positive new forms of white ethnicity as we shall now discuss.

### **The Making of New Ethnicities: White identities and cultural transformations**

In previous chapters we saw how young people at various moments - and with differing social outcomes - drew heavily upon black culture. In many cases this was found to be a problematic alliance and was frequently a means of appropriating those aspects of the Other deemed most prestigious in order to incorporate them within the immediate white peer group. However, more sustained critiques of whiteness were also emerged which derived from the lyrics of hip-hop or reggae tracks or the interracial friendships forged on a basketball court. It can be argued that these momentary identifications with the black Other, however inappropriate they may be, can entail a finer appreciation of the privileged location of white identities. Moreover, in young people's life development it is quite possible that for some these experiences can provide useful lessons in race consciousness. Undoubtedly, ethnic experimentation may enable new locations of subjectivity to arise, and, in the long-term, some of these positions may yield further points of reflection and consideration concerning the multi-layered experience of ethnicity and cultural identity.

In another account, Adrian explained how playing for a multi-ethnic football team encouraged him to view racism as part of a daily reality in the lives of black youth. He vividly remembered every player and the position they played: 'Our team had 3 white players, one Asian player, and all the others were black'. Adrian described the team as 'an incredibly tight knit bunch' but also mentioned other aspects that arose through multi-ethnic collective participation remembering that, 'it was through the team that I became aware of racism'.

Adrian: One particular occasion stands out. We went on a trip out into the country after school to play a little village team in Cedar Vale in Derbyshire [...]. When we got to the ground, back of the village school, we piled out of the school minibus (probably already changed into our kits and ready to go). The other team who were practising on the pitch saw us, and ran off. At least, that's how the memory has solidified over the years of telling the story. Probably they didn't all run off but they were certainly taken aback and drew back as this almost entirely black team leapt of the bus and ran onto the pitch. I remember it as a moment of great pride and empowerment that we could have such an effect, not me and the other white boys anyway, but I don't remember that being an issue. I felt as much a part of this inner city invasion of a peaceful white village as anybody. We won the game about 16 nil, too, I remember, with me even scoring as goalkeeper, from a penalty, the only time I have ever scored a goal in a competitive game.

On the way back going into Astworth, some of the boys in the back started pointing and jeering at the care overtaking us. I didn't know what it was all about, but one of the black boys explained to me that the boys in the back of the car, all white, had been making V signs and mouthing the words 'nigger' and so on. I didn't know what 'nigger' meant at the time - we used to have a black cat called Nigger when I was a baby so I thought it was just a name for cats, like 'paws' or 'Tiddles' or something - but I did know that what was going on was racist, that it was white people insulting other people because they were black. It was the first time I can remember being conscious of racism [...] after our triumph in Cedar Vale [it] struck me as a rather futile, pathetic, but also disturbing gesture. We were the champions after all.

Playing for a multi-ethnic football side, construed as a 'black' team, was a double-edged experience for Adrian. He enjoyed the childhood thrill of realising the powerful hold black masculinity can come to have over the white imagination when other students 'run off' or 'draw back'. The journey from the inner city to the outlying rural villages drew attention to white middle-class fears of black and working-class peoples who reside in the urban centre. While Adrian may have not have qualified on either of these accounts (as a middle-class white male) he explains how his association with the Other could extend into a collective fear of a 'black' team. The narrative consolidates

the arguments concerning the social geography of suburban and inner-city districts discussed previously (Chapter 1, 5) which explained how these spaces were encoded different racial meanings. However, on the return journey Adrian was also to learn a rather different lesson about black experiences concerning racial intolerance. While he was peripheral to what was happening on the minibus, he remembers the episode to be a 'disturbing gesture' that drew up hitherto unarticulated racial boundaries.

Adrian: Why were idiots who know nothing about us, looking down on us and acting tough. We were the tough guys. If they only know about our triumph, they would surely have been in awe of us and our team spirit. Again, I included myself in this 'we', and even though I realised that the abuse was directed at the black boys on the bus, I felt abused as well. It made me conscious of the racial differences within the team, made me feel that it wasn't just black lads who were being abused, but also the very multicultural nature of the team. So that first experience of racism, coming after the, at the time, less explicitly recognised one in Cedar Vale ... [It] felt like both an attack on me and an attempt to divide me from my friends because of my whiteness as if such friendships were unnatural, as well as an attack on my black friends. It made me think of myself as white, in a way I hadn't done before, perhaps, by denaturalising and questioning my involvement in the team which before had not seemed an issue of race at all, but one of sporting prowess and camaraderie.

Through his association with a 'black' team, Adrian came to an emotional understanding of the experience of racism, 'I felt abused too'. It might be that such personal, localised experiences are a greater resource than the policy initiatives undertaken by formal anti-racist practice in schools (Chapter 6, 7). In retrospect, Adrian is able to see both the Cedar Vale episode and the return journey back to the city of Astworth as interconnected encounters with racist attitudes. The pleasure he may have experienced in the first incident is later curtailed in the second, as the realities of racism come home, '[It] felt like both an attack on me and an attempt to divide me from my friends'. Thus, the narrative reveals the multiple points of identification - and dis-identification - that can be made, the ever-changing overlaps and splitting between the 'me' and 'not me'. Perhaps, most significantly, the episodes entailed an inevitable engagement with whiteness, 'It made me think of myself as white'. Furthermore, it would appear to show that the forms of white identity Adrian came to manage were in marked contrast to the white exclusivity practised by others. Through such interactions, white youth may come to have a more sensitive appreciation for the racially structured nature of their lives and those of ethnic

minority groups. The learning of such a race consciousness, however bewildering it may be in the immediate moment for young whites, may come to form an experiential basis from which to affirm anti-racist action.

Helena was a white, working class, seventeen-year-old student who had a Norwegian mother and an English father from Tyneside. She had spent nearly all her life in Norway but was living with her grandmother in the North East at the time I got to know her. She had long, blonde hair and blue eyes and was strongly influenced by black music. At the time, Helena was listening to artists such as *The Fugees*, *LL Cool Jay* and *Mary J Blige* as she recalls, 'Hip-hop, rap and swing, I like R 'n' B swing'. In the time in which I knew her she dressed in 'baggy' gear and tended to immerse herself in the full blazonary of black cultural style. I asked her about her dress presentation and she replied, 'I feel at *home* in this style cos I'm one of this myself'. At various moments Helena perceived herself to be black, or at least made firm identifications with black ethnicity. It was with intense feeling that she revealed, 'Oh, I would love being black ... I always feel I'm not Norwegian, I'm not English. I feel like I've more in common with the black people'.

At one level Helena's longing for blackness followed a familiar repertoire to that witnessed previously in some of the 'wannabe' accounts (Chapter 9). Like Adrian, she saw blackness as something that offered more exciting possibilities than the arid, encrusted remains of whiteness.

Helena: I think I love the hair. It sounds so stupid, but look at this hair! [*grabs her long, blonde strands*] I can't do nowt! It's just like straight. They can have curls, it can stand up straight or have it really afro. Not only the hair but they can hide everything, like do things with their body, with special shades [i.e. sunglasses] and stuff. It's like everything – everything's attractive.

In Helena's case the desire to 'be' black, and embody the meanings carried by this racial signifier were so extreme that she remarked, 'I do everything, like Michael Jackson who tries to be white, I try to be black!' Indeed, 'becoming' black had been turned into an embodied life time project when she admitted, 'I'm not saying I'm a black person in a white man's [sic.] body but I wish, and I always have, that I was

more tanned'. As such, Helena expressed a deep skin consciousness when it came to her body.

Helena: I'm also worried about my skin cos I'm so white, what am I gonna do? I need a tan, that's what I'm always thinking. If I wear a cream dress I feel I can't wear this, my skin looks white, that's what I think.

*Anoop: So you're very conscious of your skin?*

Helena: Yeah, I am. I spent loads of money last year. All my money goes on sun-beds, but not now. For example: sun-beds, creams, stuff and everything.

During interview Helena recognised this desire to become black as a type of compulsive 'sickness', it governed her life and now she was attempting to gradually gain control over the obsession.

Helena: My white friends in Norway, I started it off, and now they think, 'I need more tan'. I started it off and now I feel so sorry cos they're still doing it. They're lying in the sun-bed even more than me mon, they're lying there and one of my friends came with a pure black stomach and I was like, 'Woah! You're too black now, you look sickly black. No, that's not you'. I want a golden skin, like your [Anoop's] colour but I know I'm never, ever going to get that colour, the golden thingy.

Extensive tanning under artificial ultra-violet rays is one way in which white bodies can take on the semblance the exotic. Given the time, expense and risks involved from skin cancers this bodily regime cannot be taken lightly. Helena also engaged in bodily practices such as belly-button piercing and the art of tattooing. In these accounts the body could be viewed as a type of 'corporeal canvass' for ethnic experimentation.

Helena: I've got a Chinese tattoo on us. I think its cool, Chinese signs and everything. I used to wear some Chinese clothes that were silky.

*Anoop: When you said you would love to be black last week, did you mean black African-Caribbean?*

Helena: I would love to be black and have black skin. I don't wanna change my personality at all. I want to have darker skin, I would love that. It's always been my dream to have like a mixed colour.

Over a period of successive interviews in which I grew to know Helena, the apparently superficial attraction to blackness she expressed was found to have a deeper meaning than may at first be imagined. She continually reiterated how she felt 'at home' in the company of black people and in the context of an all-but-white institution like Snowhill Comprehensive the shared intimacy with her best friend Beverly, a black student, stood out. This sense of comfort in black circles had been developed over a sustained period of her childhood. I went on to inquire if Helena felt comfortable in white circles.

Helena: No. I don't feel comfortable at all. In black circles they haven't got this thing with snobs. They've got snobs, but they're more straight forward. Like snobs always look down on you. I like black circles better, in Norway I've got black friends. I would love being black.

Helena's mother worked as a nurse and her father was a caretaker. She told me about her clear social class identifications when she stated, 'I'm not *that* working class, but I want to be working class'. Moreover, Helena was a member of Labour Youth and it was these proletarian affiliations that had brought her for a year to Tyneside. She reported, 'If it wasn't for Labour Youth I wouldn't have come here to see my working-class background'. This sense of 'belonging' to a working-class background was an important element within her youthful biography:

Helena: What I like about Newcastle is they're really working class. It's economic. It's like ordinary people not like snobs or anything. In Norway we got loads of snobs in the town, everyone tries to be snobs, have the most beautiful house - really nice inside - and the best clothes for a hundred pounds for example and everything. I'm working class and I show everyone I'm lower working class.

Helena was able to demonstrate a fierce working-class pride through the adoption of black style and an appreciation of black music. Many of the lyrics she listened to had a particular meaning for her as a working-class young woman with a white migrant history. Just as Dick Hebdige interpreted 'the punk aesthetic ... as a white

"translation" of black "ethnicity" (1987:64), Helena too drew links between racial and social class oppression. She described hip-hop as the style of the 'underclass', prompting me to question what she meant by this.

Helena: Cos its like the text in it, the words. If something was bad its about going to shoot off his head and everything, but if you look under the text at the lyrics its about the underclass. That's how I see it anyhow.

Helena was involved in a creative reconstruction of black music: she decoded its political meanings and applied them to certain aspects of white, working-class identity. By reading race and class through one another, Helena was able to identify with black people and utilise the language of the oppressed. Moreover, she was critical of middle-class white youth who selectively appropriated what she now understood to be 'her' black street-style.

Helena: I had me own music and now the posh ones are into it, its horrible. They never liked it before and said, 'I hate hip-hop, it's an underclass thing'. I was like mad, really, really mad. They were stealing *my* style, *my* music and everything - it was *nothing* to do with them! That's what I thought anyway.

Helena was able to align herself with black expressive styles through her identification as working class. By locating herself within a broader notion of an 'underclass' she could thereby lay earnest claim to hip-hop and swing culture as 'my style, my music'. Her rejection of 'posh ones' gaining access to black culture is a direct criticism of a commercially driven (white) desire to appropriate the Other. Helena was not interested in the superficial consumption of black music. For her it represented a 'lived' style that she inhabited in her outward dress code and inner value system. She was particularly critical of white youth who would appropriate the surface skin of black culture without looking 'under the text' at the deeper political meanings carried. Helena was now a moral guardian against the cultural theft of black style, a politic that extended from music and clothes onto the dance floor.

Helena: Before, they [white youth] were talking behind me back about me clothes style and now everyone's wearing it and have started to hear me music. When I went on the dance floor - I like dance 'black' or whatever you wanna call it, like butterflies



and everything - and they'd say, 'What the hell is she doing?' And they've now started copying my style. Everything I do, they do. I don't like that.

*Anoop: But might there be black kids who are saying, 'All these white kids are stealing our style'?*

[...]

Helena: They do say that ... If you say like you like football here [Tyneside], lads say, 'That's a man's thing to do. It's the same: you have to *prove* you like it.

Helena felt that she had demonstrated a commitment to black culture that extended beyond the exterior gloss of contemporary fashion. She had earned her spurs by regularly attending black cultural events, often on her own, and slowly making friends with people there. At the start she had encountered scepticism from black youth for her initial forays into hip-hop and swing but now she felt more at home in these circles. While she maintained that she was totally comfortable at black cultural events, it would appear that this level of ease had been acquired through a gradual process of acceptance. She described her early experience of attending predominantly black venues:

Helena: They [black people] started ... saying, "White woman, white woman, white sheep". It gets to you sometimes. When you don't know anyone you feel always alone.

By demonstrating a commitment to black culture, Helena had overcome black suspicion. It was to her credit that her persistence earned her a degree of respect and acceptance from black youth, and that she was recognised as someone other than a white impostor. Furthermore, Helena did not hesitate to counter the white racism of her peers. She argued, 'They don't say it [racist abuse] in front of me, cos I'll cut off their head in me words, with me arguments!' At times this meant making a direct stance against complicit white bonding when she was in the company of black friends.

Helena: I always get assumptions like from the lads who say, 'The lass is trying to be cool like'. They say, 'Why are you talking to her, she's black?' in my home in Norway. I'm like, 'Sharrup!' I don't talk to him, so I'm like never ever talk to 'em mon. When they're sitting there, I look ugly at 'em and just never talk to him so he never talks to me.

Helena was able to use black language, postures and gestures to resist the racism of white peers. At such moments she was able to vacate a concept of white identity that drew on an allegiance to nationalism and racism, and take up an alternative subject position located in the making of new ethnicities. As a 'race traitor' she had proved that she was unprepared to take up the baton of whiteness that was held out to her by a group of white, young men. Her refusal to do this, and the vernacular response 'Sharrup!', culminates in a proud statement, 'I look ugly at 'em!', derived from black female resistance. For contributors to the US journal *Race Traitor*, such as the Free To Be Me collective, such accounts reveal 'the tremendous power of crossover culture to undermine both white solidarity and male authority. Here, cultural hybridity can allow for what Pnina Werbner(1997:16) has described as 'the possibility of new, positive ethnic anti-racist identity fusions ...'. We shall now consider the issue of cultural syncretism in more detail to examine the radical potential and constraints of this as a viable form of youth politics.

#### *Cultural syncretism and the politics of cross-cultural interactions*

As we have seen there exists a subtle delineation demarcating sensitive forms of acceptable participation within black culture from the unbridled practices of white seizure. The Skinheads in Chapter 5 were prime exponents of how black culture could be most rudely appropriated. The B-Boyz in Chapter 9 meanwhile, displayed a rather different, though no less contradictory, set of associations when it came to cultural syncretism. It appeared that white youth who had been involved in aspects of black cultural identification for a longer period of time were more likely to view themselves as defenders against potential white appropriators. Helena remained sceptical of white fetishism regarding black cultural style.

Helena: I like the music and everyone's like [*derogatory tone*], 'Ugh, she likes hip-hop'. There was no one else that likes it. And a couple of years ago some started to say [*positive tone*], 'Oh, she likes hip-hop, wow, it's cool. She likes baggy clothes, maybe I'll wear it'. And they started wearing it.

In contrast Helena viewed cultural syncretism as an embodied politics that could be practised in every day life. She saw the fusion of style as way of breaking down barriers and a means of creating new, hitherto unexplored identities.

Helena: There was this Asian rapper who was swinging and she had also Asian tones on the top. She was rapping, swinging a bit, she had this Asian thing too. She was brilliant! I think it's cool - it's a mixture of each culture. That's what I want, a mixture.

It would appear that contemporary Asian artists such as *Apache Indian*, *Talvinder Singh*, *Asian Dub Foundation*, *Corner Shop* and *Fundamental* are creating new zones of cultural inquiry in the 'third space' of diasporic movement (Bhabha, 1990a; 1990b). These musicians are moving beyond black/white racial dualisms by drawing on a spectrum of multi-ethnic influences. When asked how she saw British culture, Helena retorted, 'I dinna knae reely. I would say like that England is a big mixture of loads of cultures combined'. Helena saw the radical potential of this patchwork 'mix 'n' match' process and had incorporated it into her own life. Indeed, she was informed by a series of partial identifications that included notions of blackness, working-classness, 'Geordie' and Norwegian identity. Moreover, this was not a point of cultural confusion but a mark of achievement, 'That's what I want, a mixture'. This was a part of a conscious hybrid politics of subversion as this evocative extract illustrates:

*Anoop: Is that what you're living out, a mixture?*

Helena: Yeah, that's what I'm trying. I mix culture and everything. I think it's ridiculous, there's all different cultures and we should learn about each other ... I'm living it out, I'm a mixture. I'm not just saying it in my words and all, I'm *doing* it.

In Helena's experience, culture is not pretentious or abstract, but something that you 'live out', something you 'do'. She makes a distinction between cultural syncretism as a form of benign appropriation, and syncretism as a politically informed way of being. 'Doing' cultural identity in this manner can be a troubling prospect for the sacred governors of whiteness such as the 'Real Englishmen' Mac an Ghaill (1994) interviewed, or the Kempton Dene Skins and Real Geordies encountered elsewhere in this thesis. Helena's style is a conscious celebration of syncretism ('I'm a mixture'),

blending different cultural forms to produce new meanings and points of identification. Rather than interpret these exchanges as simple forms of incorporation, Homi K. Bhabha has emphasised the radical potential of 'mixing' through his concept of 'cultural hybridity'.

[T]he importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity ... is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge ... But the importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation ... The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation and representation (1990a:211).

As such, the fusion of black cultural style within white working-class experience may, at times, produce radical moments of disruption in the broader signifying chain of representation. Indeed, the 'third space' of black British culture may offer potential new ways for reconfiguring or 'translating' white identities amongst young people. Recounting Helena's musical interests in these terms, we find no 'original' point of production, rather, a polyglot process of global influences drawn from America, Jamaica, Africa, Britain, China, Norway etc. Even so, Helena's distrust of white youth who pilfer black culture is well founded and she herself is sensitive to the historical 'traces' which inform her own cultural practice. By mixing styles, Helena disturbs notions of cultures as hermetically sealed categories. In a sense, the boundaries between Us/Other were disrupted in a radical blurring of categoricism. Moreover, this was a culturally aware politics of transgression.

*Anoop: Are you going out clothes a 'black' style?*

Helena: I would say mix. It's like [*gesturing with hand*] mix-mix-mix! [...] I usually like going white-skinned carrying my belly-button pierce, with me tattoos. I was the first one, now all the lasses wear it in the school. It's Chinese style.

Unsettling whiteness through culturally hybrid youth styles is, then, is one way of reforming white identities in the present post-imperial moment. The personal costs involved meant that derogatory labels could be incurred from both sides of the cultural divide where the individual could be labelled a 'wigger', a 'wannabee' or a 'white

sheep'. However, 'crossing-over' retains subversive potential for contemporary postcolonial critics who claim that cultural hybridity can 'turn the gaze from the discriminated back upon the eye of power' (Bhabha, 1984:97).

While much of this cultural fusion may appear little more than a stylistic gesture, certain acts could have deeper meaning for those concerned. As a 'foreigner' coming from Norway, Helena had a peculiar status in Britain as a type of white-outsider-within. Identity was a central issue when I asked where her tattoo was placed:

Helena: [*Lifting up shirt top to reveal Chinese motif on lower back*] Here! It means happiness. That's what I want. They saw my belly button and five minutes later they all had it pierced and tattoos done. It's funny like cos I'm a foreigner and suddenly everyone's taking my style! It's strange mon. [...]

Anoop: *What made you choose that particular tattoo?*

Helena: I was thinking of a dolphin cos that's my sign of freedom and I wanted it on me ankle but thought, 'That's gonna kill, that'. Then I thought, 'I don't want a dolphin up there' [*on her back*] cos that would be stupid, like Mark in *Take That* [a defunct 'boy band']. Then I thought I'd have a Chinese sign of something I really care about. That's what it means in my head. It's quite deep.

In the same way that Helena could read 'beneath' the lyrics of hip-hop to access a 'deeper text' related to social justice, she likewise saw her tattoo as more than just a fashion symbol. The Chinese motif signified her multi-ethnic affiliations, sense of mystery and philosophical outlook on life. It was something she personally felt strongly about and recognised to be 'quite deep'. The ability to go 'beneath' the surface and explore hidden depths - a form of critical youth deconstruction - was a theme that emerged at various points in Helena's narratives. When discussing her upbringing and the pervasive attitudes towards racism she recalled, 'I look *behind* colour, that's the way my family brought me up'.

While cultural negotiations may take place through the 'cut 'n' mix' of different ethnic youth styles, this does not mean that the qualitative experience of racism can be easily elided. As we saw with Helena's gradual acceptance into the black dance scene, these relations were worked at, struggled over and could involve a degree of hardship and isolation. Moreover, the life-history accounts suggested that there were limits to the

extent to which white youth could immerse themselves within black culture. As other theoreticians have postulated, an unconditional celebration of the symbolic creativity of youth is naïve and we need also 'to ask about the *limits* of cultural hybridity ...' (Werbner, 1997:1). Indeed, at particular moments it was possible for white youth to over-step the mark, or to become an object of ridicule. Adrian described some of his early, less successful attempts to ingratiate himself with black friends:

Adrian: I picked up and tried to use some black street slang, as well as postures and gestures. I particularly remember that being able to flap your first two fingers of your right hand together so that they clicked was a prized gesture of superiority when you had outwitted an opponent. Some of the other black kids used to laugh at me, whether because I just hadn't got it right or because I was white I don't know. But it was the first time my black friends had set up some barrier to me being just like them. It wasn't that they made an issue of my whiteness, but just that here was something that was part of being in this gang that I couldn't do right.

Adrian's life history would appear to suggest that the contours of interracial friendship must be sensitively negotiated. As an integrated member of the group, the deployment of black street-slang, postures and gestures may have been tolerated up to a point. However, claiming a superior position through a finger-snapping exercise may have been read as a bridge too far, a threshold of respect that should not have been crossed. Helena also seemed to think there were certain limits to how far white people should go in their celebration of blackness as she was earlier condemnatory of white appropriators who 'stole' black style and a friend whose sun-tan was described as an excessive, 'sickly black'. She was equally scathing about the status of white rappers: 'The white rappers in Norway for example, they're shite!' she affirmed<sup>173</sup>. Indeed, in the predominantly black arena of hip-hop, whiteness for once is brought out into the open. Here, white identities are made aware of their ethnic particularity so that the norm of whiteness is disrupted. Thus, white rappers have frequently deployed an appellation that alludes to whiteness; this can be seen in the street names of white artists such as *Vanilla Ice* and *Snow*. More recently an all-white American rap group who called themselves *Young Black Teenagers* were singled out for widespread

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<sup>173</sup> In a study of 30 middle-aged white women involved in the African-American jazz scene Patricia Sunderland (1997) identified a similar type of discourse. This led her to 'take seriously the possibility that for these European American women, all that was African signified positive and desirable, and all that was non-African did not' (p.36).

condemnation despite their claim that blackness was a state of mind; as with Adrian's finger-snapping exercise, a code of 'respect' had been too severely violated.

### **Whiteness and the Regulation of Sexuality**

A feature of the life-history narratives was the way in which cultural identity could be interconnected with sexual politics. This could occur indirectly when Meena's attempt to play Alice is ridiculed as an 'impossible' femininity, and Sunil finds himself cast as the hyper-masculine Black athlete. It could also be referred to directly, as in Adrian's story of Chantel Hope and the friction that occurred across the borders of race and sexuality. Indeed, he concluded one of his narratives by writing, 'I'm struck, writing the stories, how much my sense of whiteness is also bound up with my heterosexual male identity and also with class'. Here, sexuality can become an arena for the negotiation of white identities, a space to experiment or test out boundaries. Life-history narratives came to suggest that notions of whiteness are invariably interlaced with sexuality. For example, Meena went on to describe how her sexual practices were policed across the borders of white dominance. This fragment of her life story details the transition of moving from an all girls' school to a boys' college which had a very small intake of young women at Sixth Form level.

Meena: After my 'O' Levels I left Hilman and joined Rugby College, an all boys school, which actually contained some of the most narrow-minded spoilt boys I'd ever met.

My 1st week was quite an experience - there were only 10 of us girls in my year and about 80 boys, so it was pretty intimidating to begin with.

Anyway I promised myself that I would not be intimidated.

I was the only coloured Girl again in my year but there was one other Asian boy Sanjay, and a Negro boy Danny, and loads of Chinese. I felt more comfortable, I thought this is more multiracial.

I didn't account for the assumptions that people would make from the day I joined, 'Meena do you fancy Sanjay?'

Well that's all I heard for the first 3 months - just because we were the same colour of skin everyone just assumed that I would only look at him, of course I couldn't fancy one of *them* they thought.

One day Tom Watkins, a 'Rugger Bugger' if ever there was one with about 1 Brain cell, IQ below zero kept making fun of me and Sanjay in front of the whole year in the common room one Lunch hour.

'Meena do you fancy Sanjay, he fancies you'

He just went on and on and on.

Then to my surprise Kurt Brown who hardly ever had a nice word to say about anyone shouted at Andrew.

'Oh Tom, shut up you're embarrassing Meena'.

Tom thought he'd answer back as he always did.

'Meena can't get embarrassed stupid because she can't go red'.

- Well the room went quite quiet until I couldn't control my laughter any more and laughed in his face.

'You're so incredibly thick Tom of course I get embarrassed'.

I left the common room, hearing my year all laughing their socks off at Tom - who's embarrassed now, I thought.

This exposition of normative white reveals a complex articulation between race and sexuality. In an article plainly entitled 'White/Whiteness', Vron Ware and Les Back (1995) explain how conceptions of whiteness are permeated with dynamics of gender. Meena's account demonstrates how this articulation is managed. Sexual practices are mapped across an axis of racial symmetry where interracial relationships, at least in predominantly white schools, become taboo. An assumed coupling is made between Meena and Sanjay which places each of them outside white courtship rituals. The continual baiting that Meena endures is a form of sexual harassment that is both racialised and gender specific. The harassment is an encoded practice; a way of policing interracial relationships by outlining the performative routes for acceptable behaviour<sup>174</sup>. As such, this practice conceals white desire by specifying the sexual practices of the Other. Indeed, Meena questions the normative assumptions of a masculinity founded on the regulation of whiteness; 'Of course I couldn't fancy one of *them* they thought'. Policing the sexual practice of black males like Sanjay has an historical resonance for Hoch (1979:47) where '[d]efence of manhood demanded, above all, the defence of the white goddess of civilisation against the dark, sex-crazed barbarians at the gates... .' In this reading, white femininities are the prize for the

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<sup>174</sup> Writing about the performative styles of masculinity and femininity Judith Butler (1990) has described the way a 'heterosexual matrix' acts to consolidate such identities as 'natural' by providing them with an 'appearance of substance'. In Chapter 5 it appeared that it may now be time to 'racialise' this matrix where the reproduction of normativity also requires the regulation of separate and distinct 'racial' categories.



‘white hero’ and marked as unattainable to those who cannot lay claim to the emblem, ‘white’. Here, in the form of the bullying, brainless ‘Rugger Bugger’, we find a rather different version of middle-class, white masculinity than the self-proclaimed ‘puny’, ‘pallid’ and intellectually sensitive identity which Adrian cautiously fostered.

A further assumption embedded in the narrative is the belief in an unfeeling Other, a body without emotion. Subsequently, there is a joke that Meena cannot be embarrassed ‘because she can’t go red’. Once more, skin colour becomes the basis for asserting other differences, such as feelings of attraction or embarrassment. At the same time, the narrative suggests there are possibilities, even for ‘macho’ white students, to forego the privilege of whiteness and question its practice. This occurs when Kurt ‘who hardly ever had a nice word to say about anyone’ tells Tom to ‘shut up’ and other students collectively laugh at the insensitivity of a peer. This supports the findings of the Burnage Report<sup>175</sup> (1989) which indicates that white students have a key role to play in anti-racist politics. As we saw in Chapter 6, monolithic notions of white subjectivity which cast individuals as ‘ferret-eyed fascists or committed anti-racists’ (p.402) are myopic and unhelpful. David Gillborn (1996) pursues the concern that white students are too readily cast as potential antagonists, rather than allies, in the struggle against inequality. Instead, Gillborn encourages practitioners to regard white pupils ‘as critics’ of racism and contemporary anti-racist policy since ‘it is increasingly obvious that white students occupy a pivotal role: any genuine attempt to challenge racism in education must engage with their perceptions and experiences’ (1996:170). At the same time it is clear that some individuals are developing oppressive styles of whiteness to consolidate their identities. This may be seen in a host of actions including a decision, however unconscious, to date only whites - another symptom of ‘acting white’ (Ware & Back, 1995).

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<sup>175</sup> The violent murder of the Manchester Asian student Ahmed Iqbal Ullah by a White peer in Burnage Hight School, September 1986, prompted an inquiry commissioned by Ian MacDonald into racism in education (see Chapter 7). The findings suggested that Burnage was not remarkably different from other schools in its level of racism, but that a number of factors combined to produce a fatal stabbing. One of these factors was the insensitive anti-racist policies operating in the school which benefitted neither Black or White students. This remark was high-jacked by the New Right and used as evidence that anti-racism could in fact exacerbate racism in schools. Sadly, this has encouraged the erosion of anti-racist praxis in British schools.

The movement by minority groups towards whiteness and light-skinned identification is in itself nothing new (Fanon, 1970). One may be reminded here of excerpts from the great cricket book *Beyond a Boundary*, by CLR James (1994)<sup>176</sup>, in which the author discusses how sporting clubs were fractured across lines of class and colour in the West Indies. In a chapter entitled, 'The Light and the Dark', we learn of the complex ways colour could be evoked as a means of asserting a social hierarchy. Thus, Queen's Park Club contained wealthy whites and a few members from 'well established mulatto families' (p.49); then there was the 'almost exclusively white' Shamrock, made up from old Catholic families (p.50); Stingo which comprised casual labourers and unemployed men who were 'Totally black' with 'no social status whatever' (p.50); Maple, the club of the brown-skinned middle class; Shannon, the club of the black lower-middle class. As CLR James announces, colour could at times come to override class, though the two were invariably linked.

There are the nearly white hanging on tooth and nail to the fringes of white society, and these, as is easy to understand, hate contact with the darker skin far more than some of the broader-minded whites. Then there are the browns, intermediates, who cannot by any stretch of imagination pass as white, but who will not go one inch towards mixing with people darker than themselves. And so on, and on, and on (p.51).

The idea of a 'nearly white' group who attach themselves 'tooth and nail' to the apron-strings of white society also filtered into some life-history accounts. As CLR James indicates, it may well be that those who regard themselves as 'nearly white' can become some of the most ardent defenders of whiteness.

Nathan Curtis and Sabina Choudhury expressed a general preference to mix with white people and at times saw themselves as inhabiting an unspecified, neutral racial identity. Each of these participants were from mixed-heritage backgrounds and had visibly fair-skinned complexions. In CLR James' terms they performed their identities

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<sup>176</sup> I would like to extend special thanks to my friend and 'cricketing-buff' Gareth Potts, for turning my attention to this.

as 'nearly white'. Indeed, Nathan provided the only narrative that made no obvious reference to ethnicity, racism or any aspects of his cultural identity. He had grown up with his white mother but had a Pakistani father who lived and worked abroad. However, the absence or neutrality of a racial identity is itself a feature of white ethnicity as we have seen in Adrian's reference to 'a lack in myself' and his sense that there was 'something I didn't quite have'. Nathan's parents were separated, and when I asked him about his own cultural identity he insisted, 'I see myself as white, really'. Locating your identity within a dominant ethnic category is a preferred choice. Sabina's narrative which follows, likewise discloses the practice of opting for whiteness and reveals her attempt to consolidate this identity through heterosexuality. Sabina (23 years) was a Primary School teacher with a white mother of Irish-Catholic descent and an Indian father. She claimed to have few experiences of racism, yet appears to be engaged in fraught dialogues with whiteness. The taped-interview took place with her white, Welsh partner Phil present. The extract opens when I asked Sabina if there were any feelings of anxiety regarding her multi-heritage identity.

Sabina: I tell you what's made me feel anxious, I dunno whether you're gonna relate to this or not, is the idea that, and I think a lot of people, a lot of westernised especially mixed race Indian girls associate with is the fact that in yer head somewhere in the background you can't imagine yourself with an Indian boy.

D'you know what I mean you can't, even though you're Indian yerself and there's nothin' you particularly dislike about your culture, or whatever, that you can't. That you don't like the thought of yerself bein' with an Indian boy because that would mean that you'd have all the bad bits of it in yer head.

Y'know what I mean? That there's no difference between your outlook and somebody that's White, well there is, but d'you know what I mean? That there's nothin' greatly distinguishable about it but s'pose in my head I would always think that if I went out with someone Indian it would be that domineering side that would come out y'know?

It would end up in one of those relationships (which it mightn't be) but I think that's a cause for anxiety ... 'Cos it makes it feels that on the other hand like you're neglecting that you're [Indian].

It makes you feel on the one hand that you're somethin' bad; bad about Indian people, Indian boys, which you don't want to 'cos you're meant to be relatin' to them because it's your own background, or whatever.

This extract is about internalising whiteness. A noticeable feature is the marked ambivalence and cyclical shifts between deconstructing and reconstructing Asian stereotypes. On the one hand, Sabina admits that there is nothing wrong with Asian

culture, yet on the other, feels compelled to reject Asian males. Her response is gender- and ethnically specific, fearing the stereotypical fundamental, 'domineering', Asian male. She claims to be unable to imagine herself with an Indian partner for the fear that 'you'd have all the bad bits in yer head'. The intensity of hatred towards blackness, as strengthened over time, can be such that black people themselves internalise notions of white superiority with which they come to identify<sup>177</sup>. The action of 'self-rejection' occurs through a complex psycho-dynamic process of 'splitting' across interior levels within the subject. Fanon describes this dynamic as 'Black Skin/White Masks', where the subject is filled with such self-loathing for the 'black' parts of themselves that s/he chooses to identify with whiteness.

Moral consciousness implies a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness into a bright part and an opposing black part. In order to achieve morality, it is essential that the black, the dark, the Negro vanish from consciousness. Hence a Negro is forever in combat with his own image (1970:136)

The circulating ambiguities found in Sabina's discussion may also suggest that she too is psychically 'forever in combat' with her own perceptions of 'Asianness'. Given the amount of negative imagery concerning the 'incompatibility' of Asian (different) lifestyles with white (normal) culture, it is not surprising that Sabina describes the idea of relationships with 'Indian boys' as 'a cause for anxiety'. Thus, she feels that 'on one hand you're somethin' bad' and tries to disassociate herself from what she sees as 'Indian culture'. Dating an Asian male would forego any privileges of whiteness and 'would mean that you'd have all the bad bits of it in yer head'.

It appeared the norm of whiteness played an integral part in forming split perceptions between English and Asian culture when I asked Sabina if she had much contact with Asian boys while growing up.

Sabina: No, not at all y'see, so it's probably made a big bogeyman in my head of er ... of the worst that it could possibly be goin' out with somebody. Their family expectin' you to marry them ... erm bein' under the thumb, all those sort of things which people associate with sort of er ... a lot of Asian ways of life.

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<sup>177</sup> Early psychological studies presenting black children with photographs or dolls of different ethnic groups, indicated a marked preference for being white (Clarke, K. & Clarke, C. 1939, 1947).

The splitting of the good object/bad object through a racial dichotomy may help explain Sabina's divisions between Asian and white cultural practices. Within psychoanalytical schools of thought, neglecting the 'bad' parts is a protective measure for keeping safe that which is felt to be 'good'. For Klein *et.al.* (1955), splitting is a way of structuring the psyche through separation. This allows for the preservation of the 'good' parts from the threatening, destructive 'bad' parts that can harm the ego and give rise to anxiety. The idea of forming a relationship with someone from an Indian background is seen through a prism of negative imagery. The symbolic split between white and Asian culture identifies an Indian way of life that focuses on arranged marriages, family expectations and female subservience with women 'under the thumb'. Dating becomes a critical lens for focusing racial identity and as Twine (1996) has pointed out, can be a key formative moment that leads to the loss of 'racial' neutrality in the lives of 'mixed-heritage' women. For Twine, being comfortable around whites and forming relationships with them can operate as a 'comfort zone' which cocoons respondents from particular forms of racist exclusion. This indicates that skin colour is not an insurmountable barrier to accessing subject positions within whiteness.

Even so, an inability to reconcile one's Otherness may produce a series of splits, fissures, fractures which result in anxiety projection (Pajackowska & Young, 1993). Sabina attempts to handle the conflicting emotions through projection: 'bad' feelings are displaced onto an Asian Other, 'the typical Indian'. In this fantasy of whiteness 'the typical Indian' comes to embody the secret terror of blackness represented as 'a big bogeyman'. The metaphor is gendered and 'racialised' suggesting a larger than life, monstrous Other. Within the horror genre, the bogeyman is a synthesis of all that is evil, a nightmare figure of darkness that lurks in the shadow of white imagination. At certain moments he appears to terrorise the Western living world, and, as is often the case in Hollywood films, is rarely ever completely vanquished but lies dormant until the next sequel. For Sabina, the fear of a big black bogeyman is a perpetual source of anxiety, regulated through elaborate rituals of whiteness structured around dating, friendship groups etc.

The life histories of Nathan and Sabina indicate that identifications with whiteness may be more readily obtainable through a 'mixed-heritage' upbringing<sup>178</sup>. Here the subject position, 'white', may be assimilated at an early age and practised as an identity. The practice of whiteness is seen in Sabina's decision not to date Indian men, a choice that may ultimately offer some of the securities of white privilege and provide alternative social networks beyond Asian circles. Indeed, the narratives of people from 'mixed-heritage' backgrounds may be especially fruitful for interpreting the negotiation of whiteness, as Alastair Bonnett explains:

[T]here are many positions, apart from, or overlapping with, Blackness, from which Whiteness has been 'understood', 'used', 'brought into', 'ignored', 'rejected'. The different uses of Whiteness by diverse non-White communities (for example, within the 'Third World' and by people of 'mixed-heritage') may provide, perhaps, some of the most useful material for future anti-racist attempts to locate and deconstruct this most controversial of categories (1996b:153).

In keeping with this fluid notion of ethnicity Tina Hussain (23 years) negotiated whiteness in an altogether different, though no less complex way, to Nathan and Sabina. Although her parents were of Middle Eastern background she saw herself as occupying multiple heritages from being born and raised in Britain whilst having a migrant parentage. Tina made a point of stating that she did not identify as being someone of ethnic minority background and so at times described herself as British. However, at other moments Tina claimed she preferred to use the term 'Arabic' as a more accurate indicator of 'felt' ethnic affiliations. She went on to explain the multiple cultural heritages that come to comprise her biography: 'I'm British, I was born in England but my parents were from Iraq initially, both my parents are from Iraq'. Tina went on to elucidate how this fragmented biography could not be easily explained when it came to filling out forms where an 'official' ethnic identity had to be declared. At these points the issue of whiteness and nationhood came to the fore:

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<sup>78</sup> Although an embryonic literature exists about White engagements with forms of blackness (Hewitt 1986, Jones 1988, Back 1996, Wulf 1995), material relating to Black negotiations of whiteness remain underdeveloped. A departure from this is Twine's (1996) *Brown Skinned White Girls* which explores the experiences of Black women who have been 'raised white' and identify with whiteness at various life stages.

I never know what to put, because I've been told, 'Well you're white, tick "White"', you know as I look down at my skin ... so I never know what to tick. I always tick 'Other' and put Origin: Middle Eastern. I never know what to write for that really [...] It's a very strange concept that I still haven't got my head round. I don't know if it's being second generation ... it's a really hard one.

In this way Tina wished to affirm her diverse heritage though in many instances it was clear that she could 'pass' as white. Indeed, her ability to be regarded as white meant that on occasion she would be party to the casual racism of others who did not know of her ethnic background. While it would be easier to ignore such remarks Tina saw racism as a personal affront. During her time working at a pub renowned for popular racism she relinquished white privilege, described herself as Middle Eastern, and challenged racism directly. At such moments Tina felt discursively placed by racism as Other and publicly drew attention to her mixed cultural identity. However, at other moments, for example when she was with members of her family, she was less able to pass as white. Furthermore, Tina had grown up and attended a mainly-white school where she had been singled out for racism, 'You know being called paki, even though I'm quite obviously not you know'. Thus, Tina was continually moving between the recognised but limited spaces of 'white' and 'not-white'. In so doing she revealed the contingency of white identity in people's social lives. For example, she found that in places where her surname was generally unknown (such as in the pub she worked at) she tended to be treated as 'white' by the locals. This was less likely to occur though in more formal situations (e.g. when providing 'official' declarations of ethnicity) or amongst people she knew well.

Tina wrote about her 'off-white' status when growing up:

Tina: Coming from parents of middle-eastern background and being a few shades darker than "lily white" I experienced first-hand, naïve racism, primarily from the kids but when I asked teachers for support, none was forthcoming.

These experiences indicate that 'passing' as white is a complex and contingent process, where cultural identities are constantly being fashioned and re-fashioned in the public arena. In contrast to Sabina and Nathan, Tina wished to embrace her migrant status.

She was proud of her multiple heritage and showed a commitment to anti-racism. As such, she felt little desire to secure a 'lily white' future and was explicit in her refusal to 'act white'. Instead, she would most usually describe herself as Arabic and was willing to discuss her cultural heritage in the classroom. The biographies of Sabina, Nathan and Tina reveal, then, how whiteness can be internalised, performed and resisted in different social situations.

### *Internalising Whiteness, 'Acceptance' and 'Rejection'*

It appears that sexuality is, perhaps, the most uncertain realm for negotiating whiteness. Unlike Sabina and Nathan, some respondents were critical of whiteness yet plagued by different types of ambivalence. In a compelling life story account Sunil explains how a volatile nexus of racism, masculinity and sexuality could initiate a defensive riposte to whiteness.

Sunil: When it came to girls it was the most harrowing. When my white friends were knocked back they could take it - calling them bitches etc. I could never take the rejection. I took it once and that was enough. Why did she reject me? Because I was a paki? It may have been for a whole host of reasons; age, size, fashion, interest, not her type etc. but all I could think of was because I was black. From then on my line was 'I don't fancy her'.

Although the domain of sexuality may be a sphere where fears and anxieties generally proliferate, it appeared that engaging with whiteness in a culture of racism heightened insecurity. Sunil points out how his white friends dealt with rejection through a misogyny which displaced inferiority back upon women as 'bitches'. The narratives I received from black and mixed-heritage respondents indicate that rejection is less likely to be expelled but can be *internalised*. As Sunil explains, when rejection is interpreted by a colour conscious, self-critical subject, it comes to stand for much more than 'not being her type'. Relatively speaking, the privilege of white masculinity can act as a buffer zone when dealing with the traumas of rejection. As Sunil comments, there may be multiple explanations for rejection but the acknowledgement of white regulatory sexual practice causes endless self-doubt - 'was it because I was a paki?', and permanent psychic scarring - 'I took it once and that was enough'.



Where the practice of whiteness goes unspoken, rejection is intensely difficult to handle, yet processes of acceptance can be equally problematic.

Sunil: The cultural climate has dramatically changed in the last few years, as blacks are becoming more acceptable. The attitudes of whites towards us has changed no doubt for the better but my difference is still apparent even in this 'positive' aspect. More white girls actually show an interest in me, this does not necessarily make me feel more accepted or comfortable, rather it accentuates my feelings of being different. Does she want to go out with me because of who I am, Sunil Sharma, or because she wants a taste of spice, an exotic black fantasy or worse still due to a patronising pity of guilt?

The recurrent self-questioning is again a theme, and hardly surprising given the elaborate fantasies of whiteness that operate across the boundaries of fear and desire. Sunil recognises this ambivalence, where he can be a 'paki' one moment and 'an exotic black fantasy' the next. Along with white desire he also identifies other negative aspects of liberal whiteness such as pity and guilt. For him these aspects of whiteness remain 'patronising' as he questions the 'positive' way he feels viewed today, which allude to complex styles of racism. These restrictive feelings were also touched upon by Naomi who described how she felt 'limited', 'wary', 'invisible'. She too was hyper-critical of herself describing how, 'people always have an image of how you should behave as well, and you don't want to rise to that image. So you're always debating with yourself how to respond'. The paralysing effect of these images is such that Sunil wonders whether he is liked for who he is or what he represents in the white imaginary. The split perceptions of the stereotypical Other make it difficult to feel personally accepted, as witnessed in Sunil's accounts. For Naomi, responding to the fetishes and phobias of whiteness can turn you inside-out:

Naomi: Oh, it's very restrictive in that you see yourself through other people ... You want to get inside yourself, you're always standin' outside yourself and sayin', 'Am I doin' this or not? How am I comin' across?

The self-doubt and internal debating which is a feature of the accounts is produced, in part, through a sustained engagement with whiteness. These manoeuvrings result in paranoia, phobias and self-awareness which should not be dismissed as being over-sensitive or as having 'a chip on your shoulder'. Rather, they are the psycho-dynamic costs incurred in having to respond to the norm of whiteness in everyday life. Small

wonder that Sabina is at pains to make confused splits between Asian culture and white, English culture, while Naomi feels twisted inside-out with 'two heads'. The psychic effects of internalising negative images of blackness lead to the horror Sabina feels to Asian men, Naomi's experiences of feeling like 'you're always standin' outside yourself' and Sunil's belief that ultimately you symbolise 'a taste of spice'. Although misrecognition may not be an uncommon emotion more generally in relationships, when it is experienced through the repertoire of white fantasy these feelings become exacerbated. This is partly due to norms of white heterosexuality (Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1993; Richardson 1996), as Meena indicated when it was presumed that her and Sanjay could only 'fancy' each other. Living with whiteness encouraged respondents to feel inwardly 'different', 'in total isolation', 'unique', 'exotic', 'anxious', 'in a world of my own', 'apart from the rest of the team'.

At the same time, there were nuanced experiences of whiteness. Amerjit Singh became increasingly aware of his colour when his younger brother was born and direct references to skin complexion were made. In a written account, Amerjit reveals the complex, symbolic usage of whiteness.

The whole of our extended family turned up for my brother's first birthday. Although he was named Talvinder (Taz), my father named him 'Kaala' meaning black. The reason for this was that my brother's complexion was so milky white - a colour synonymous with beauty within Indian culture. Everyone kept on repeating how beautiful and white Taz was and my father through fear and superstition named him Kaala. This further confused my understanding of language, colour, beauty and race because I was still called 'Lovely' a name that had been give to me in India by my cousins of primary age who had made use of the basic English that they had access to. So in England we had this confused situation: my beautiful, born in London, light-skinned brother called Kaala and me the Indian/Sikh with the parrot green coat, the dark skin, (to all intense [sic.] purposes a 'choora', a low caste Hindu) named Lovely.

As Amerjit's narrative suggests, notions of whiteness could generate fear and suspicion as well as desire. The 'milky white' Taz is contrasted with the dark skinned 'choora', Amerjit. However, it is Taz who is given the pet-name 'Kaala' (black) and Amerjit who is called 'Lovely'. In this sense the seemingly straightforward association of whiteness with beauty and blackness with ugliness are further complicated. The tale provides an insight into colour symbolism within black

communities to reveal how whiteness is not just the preserve of ethnic majorities, as CLR James recognised. This implies a need to look beyond black/white racial binaries to the discursive construction of whiteness in all its manifold gradations.

Satpal Verdi (18 years), a British Asian male who was heavily into the independent music scene, also had an intriguing life history that skirted the parameters of whiteness. Satpal played in a band and enjoyed going to gigs and visiting alternative night-club venues in the city centre. In interview he admitted how 'there's a lot of ways in which I'm English' yet he also ate Indian food at home, spoke Punjabi and had friends from different ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, we frequented many of the same drinking establishments together and had numerous discussions about music, football and politics. Growing up as a working-class male in a North English town, and then the West Midlands, he became conscious of how many of his activities were regarded as 'white' practices.

Satpal: It was weird because like all my friends were white and I never really thought anything of it before. I started drinking, going to pubs and stuff when I was about 14-15 years, definitely I was going in the pubs quite regular. And it's just a way of life y'know, all my friends did it so y'know I just followed 'em. Then I went to college, people started saying like, 'Your friends are all white you haven't got any Asian friends and stuff'. It was like they were trying to say to me, 'You're trying to be someone who you're not. You're trying to be white but you're not.'

Satpal went on to discuss how dating white girls was regarded by Asian youth in his college as a sign that he was a 'coconut', that is, someone who was brown on the outside and white on the inside. The phrase, a modern day equivalent of 'black skin/white masks', was a condemnatory insult for those individuals who appeared to be situating themselves within social practices deemed 'white' and were thereby said to be (self)rejecting black identity. While Satpal was proud of his heritage in the same way as Tina Hussain, he recognised that he was drawn to many white, British activities which he regarded as simply 'a way of life'. In a reverse situation of the 'wannabee' B-Boyz, who were said to 'act black', Satpal was accused of 'trying to be white'. What each of these examples expose is the socially contingent meaning of whiteness and how it can traverse simple associations with skin pigmentation. Despite these insults, Satpal was not suffering from a Fanonian black inferiority complex, nor did he make any claims of wanting to be white. While Sabina and Nathan displayed

preferred identifications with whiteness, the accounts by Tina, Amerjit and Satpal, in rather different ways, suggested a need to move beyond a black/white racial dichotomy. Sabina, Nathan, Tina, Satpal and the 'milky white' Taz could all appear to be occupying whiteness at a discursive level in highly particular circumstances. As such, each and every one of the life histories displays the various ways in which whiteness is negotiated, accepted and rejected. This would that young people are implicated in the making of new cultural heritages.

### **Concluding Comments: Reconceptualising Whiteness**

The life histories included in this chapter indicate that although whiteness may be an elusive, transparent norm for the majority, it is vividly identified in many minority accounts of schooling as well as those of a select number of white 'race traitors'. These participants demonstrated an acute awareness of the repertoire of white activity: fetishes, phobias, assumptions, silences, longing, guilt and pity. The biographies did not simply draw the line at exposing the norms of whiteness. At times they offered a critical deconstruction of white racial identity which could entail a subversion of the regimes of whiteness. Moreover, the accounts provided clear evidence that whiteness is an activity secured through cultural practices and social rituals. Thus, certain 'white' respondents were attempting to escape whiteness (albeit with the incursion of social costs) through particular routines associated with cultural syncretism and 'crossing over'. These 'white escapees' were moving beyond a superficial appropriation of black culture - of the type often found in the responses of the B-Boyz (Chapter 9) - towards an informed political consciousness. That they could talk openly about white ethnicity indicated that they had gleaned knowledge of this through personal forays and early experimentation with black culture.

At the opposite end of the spectrum could be found young people who exhibited similar symptoms to those identified by Frantz Fanon as 'black skin/white masks'. These 'nearly white' youth, to borrow a phrase from CLR James, sought to 'achieve' whiteness by immersing themselves in established white practices and bleaching the last vestiges of their black cultural heritage. Some of these respondents expressed an acute loathing for blackness and were keen to distance themselves from any

association with the social category 'black'. In so doing they engaged in psychic processes of 'splitting' to handle the negative images conveyed in dominant styles of whiteness. For these participants, internal machinations curtailed their psychic horizons and social lives to the extent that they 'couldn't imagine' dating anyone who wasn't white and they tended to enter into defensive practices that relieved them from associations with blackness. This revealed whiteness to be a highly regulated identity that was augmented in courtship rituals, friendship networks and other cultural practices. Some of these participants even tended to view themselves as 'white' or were able to pass as white in certain situations indicating that whiteness is an activity, strategy or technique. Ultimately, participants could situate themselves within discourses of whiteness as critical subjects, equal participants, or members who wished to internalise these values as representative of purity and 'goodness'.

The life histories of a number of participants from minority backgrounds revealed how their identities were continually pressured into a series of positioned engagements with whiteness. Here, a range of imaginative negotiations were entered into - a desire not to be differentiated in a photograph game; dreams to wear a blonde wig and play *Alice in Wonderland*; fears of being disclosed as a chappati-eater; the use of parodic jokes to counter white embarrassment; decisions to date whites only; a determination to avoid the humiliation of white rejection. These active manoeuvrings across the structures of whiteness, though a necessary strategy for daily interaction, could incur psychodynamic costs. The respondents in the life-history study showed great initiative when it came to handling the oppressive rigours of white dominance. They eloquently recounted the stifling effects of being continually positioned within expected roles of behaviour. Even in the most 'positive' sense, white fantasies involved the projection of 'otherness', ascribing bodily differences of 'uniqueness', 'exotica', 'spice', 'rhythm', 'sass' and 'Black Magic'. This created confusion and suspicion in the minds of individuals, most noticeably in sexual interactions, that could lead them to enter into acts of 'constant debating' while feeling 'self-critical', 'wary' and 'limited'. Processes of rejection and acceptance became highly problematic for black respondents; given the variety and extent of racisms in contemporary society, their feelings of confusion and paranoia appear well founded.

A further striking feature of the accounts was the focus on composite, often subtle narratives of racism. Although some respondents did refer to 'spectacular' episodes of racist violence and abuse, these were rarely viewed as 'significant moments'<sup>179</sup>.

Instead, tales that tended to cut across psychic circuits - only to be relayed into the paths of daily existence - were more vital. Responses to whiteness were nuanced by the subject position of individuals as gendered, classed, and sexed beings. Despite these variables, many of the minority accounts appeared to prioritise blackness as potentially the most visible and socially determining of experiences. At times, this identity could be privileged over others; 'you're also a woman, you're also a person, you're a human being but you're just black which is something you have no control over' (Naomi). However, the ways in which gender and sexuality interacted with racism were central to understanding black experiences of negotiating whiteness.

If anti-racist practitioners are to successfully dismantle the white norm, it requires the recognition of whiteness as a practice, the repetitive attempt at 'being' white. Progress towards destabilising the norm can be made if white students and teachers are encouraged to view whiteness as sustained through actions, rather than as a static location of power and privilege. The radical accounts of white people who refused to align themselves with white oppression provide encouraging evidence that the exigencies of white power can be overturned. Adrian's condemnation of racist hostility, and an emerging self-reflexive critique of his own white middle-class masculinity are an example of this. So too are Helena's narratives relating to her gradual inclusion into black friendship circles and her repudiation of white racism. Attempts by black respondents to insert themselves into white discourses further expose that whiteness is an activity, rather than a phenotypic accomplishment. Conceptualising whiteness as an active verb, rather than a pre-given noun, may in turn lead to alternative activities of subversion. As such, it can be said that subjects constantly construct and re-construct themselves through discourse. Here, the emphasis is on 'what you do' rather than 'who you are'. The assertion of whiteness as praxis may help dislodge notions of a pre-determined subject position whereby 'being'

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<sup>179</sup> Some of the participants referred to moments of racist harassment in a mundane manner. This appeared to be something they expected from time to time. Instead, many were more anxious and perturbed by the unexpected traumas that had come their way. This would seem to imply that accounts of racism in the lives of black people must now be attuned to the overbearing dominance of whiteness.

white is too readily conflated with being racist<sup>180</sup>. All students lead racially organised lives; to fail to engage with white cultural experience only serves to encourage nationalism, as Roger Hewitt in his London based research explains:

White pupils, to some extent, seem like cultural ghosts, haunting as mere absences the richly decorated corridors of multicultural society. And when they attempt to turn the symbols and emblems of 'their' cultural identity, they find either very little that fits their needs or, in the case of the Union Jack, that the emblem itself is already a contested battle-ground (1996:40).

Thus, viewing whiteness as an action may be liberating for teachers plagued with guilt, or white students looking for affirmative identities beyond racism. Understanding whiteness as an activity may allow for subversive identities at once critical of nationalism, and in contradiction to the 'ephemeral' options posited by much school multiculturalism. As it stands, white working-class students with few material advantages are both inclined to resist school policy while developing whiteness to maintain any semblance of power. A politics that is sensitive to these dynamics may yet access the pleasure of mutual transgression whilst simultaneously providing the basis for a more thought out, collective critical engagement with whiteness.

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<sup>180</sup> The concept of whiteness as a practice may help avoid two of the pit-falls identified by Dyer (1993) of this project - 'White guilt' and the liberalising of inequality through 'me-too-ism'.

## CONCLUSION



## Introduction

The aim of this study has been to shed light on the ethnicities of white youth and thereby explore the meaning of whiteness in young people's lives. This focus was imperative in view of the corresponding number of studies already completed that investigate the all too visible ethnicities of minority groups. In contrast, it appeared that issues of Englishness, whiteness and white cultural identity were largely invisible in the current literature on youth, racism and ethnicity. The *racialised* experiences of white youth in English contexts appeared a glaring absence alongside contemporary postcolonial literature. As such, the empirical research undertaken in this thesis demonstrates that we can no longer see ethnicity as the prerogative of an exotic, foreign Other, something that exists seemingly outside an ever imaginary 'us'. This turn to whiteness now demands that we fundamentally reconceptualise our understanding of ethnicity, culture and identity. To enable this to occur the thesis was divided into three sections that were respectively concerned with engaging with whiteness, 'doing' whiteness and finally, re-thinking whiteness.

A distinctive feature of this research has been the combined use of *historical* and *ethnographic* methods to examine whiteness. Historical methods were especially productive for my investigation upon white cultural identities; they provided new evidence to indicate that a large section of so-called English whites have only recently been able to identify as 'white'. The historiography demonstrated how white identity was initially the preserve of the English elite and only later came to include broader sections of the working class. As such, historical analysis revealed how the social meaning of whiteness has shifted and altered throughout the industrial ages. In a complimentary way the contemporary ethnographic data provided rare and detailed micro-studies of young people's white ethnicities in the postcolonial situation. This empirical information demonstrated how whiteness could be 'consolidated', 'recuperated', 'negotiated' or 'relinquished' in the lives of young people. Here, multiple subject positions were found to exist within the hitherto presumably monolithic identity 'white'. In this respect, through a rigorous undertaking of historiography and ethnography we could learn much about the 'making' and 'unmaking' of whiteness over time and place. Moreover, the use of multiple methods – historiography, interview, participant observation, life-history method – has enabled

a robust, embodied account of subculture to emerge in contrast to the skeleton portrayals of youth that have occasionally arisen in more cursory observations.

Given the paucity of information regarding the ethnicities of white youth it seemed to me that white, Anglo-identity was an unspoken topic within current debates in the area. As such, my approach represents a departure from recent work in the field that has been specific to the US (Chapter 2). Subsequently, the thesis began by documenting the development of whiteness in urban areas during the English industrial period (Chapter 1)<sup>181</sup>. This opening chapter asked the pertinent question of how the British social classes became white. In particular it was found that whiteness was inflected by the social configurations of class, ethnicity, gender and location. By drawing upon nineteenth-century reports, surveys and social observations of English urban life, parts of the industrial city were represented in similar ways to the Africa of Empire: each landscape unequivocally formed a Dark Continent. Moreover, the people residing in the urban interior were 'blackened' by their association with certain spaces including the East End, ethnic minority ghettos and notorious slum areas. In this respect the construction of race, place and identity were inscribed within one another and could be articulated in a myriad of different ways (Jackson & Penrose, 1993). Additionally, the corporeal representations which were especially attributed to lower-working class inhabitants further secured their exclusion from white privilege. In the bourgeois imagination the urban poor were felt to *embody* the physical and moral characteristics of animals. These ideas converged in the notion that this impoverished stratum formed a distinct species of being. Furthermore, these early industrial discourses were also found to be in evidence in the contemporary Tyneside ethnographic study of Charver Kids. In this respect there was an *historical continuity* as regards the representation of an urban English underclass.

The meticulous historiography of ethnic and social class relations produced in Chapter 1, extends and develops the recent work conducted on whiteness in the US. This literature was reviewed in Chapter 2 and could be paradigmatically understood by way of three broad repertoires of interpretation: materialist, deconstructionist and

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<sup>181</sup> In the space that allows, there is not room to discuss the pre-industrial formation of whiteness and its relationship to the English aristocracy.

psychoanalytic frames. The analytical frameworks were compared and contrasted so that the merits and weaknesses of each of these approaches could be discussed. Indeed, each of these paradigms was found to afford special insight into the subject of whiteness and for this reason they were drawn upon, to varying degrees, in this study. By keeping each of these traditions in play I was able to arrive at multiple levels of understanding. In retrospect, the materialist research into whiteness was of greatest benefit for my study on account of the historical rigour and the keen passion to challenge white domination. While my own research was less obviously polemical, as a form of critical ethnography I still found myself inevitably grappling with questions of pedagogic change and the fashioning of new ethnicities (Chapters 7, 9). These are issues which many ethnographers seldom deal with as sociologists are often too wary of over-simplifying what are always highly complex debates. However, I would hope that my call to engage with white Anglo-ethnicities is taken seriously even if the potential routes offered are to fall by the wayside.

Although the current research on whiteness was of interest, the taken-for-granted emphasis on the US had little to say about the specificities of white, English ethnicities. In this respect, the transatlantic history of race relations in America appears to have leant itself to specific formations of whiteness. Consequently, such theories could not be simply transplanted to 'make sense' of white Anglo-ethnicity in the British post-imperial moment. Instead, Chapter 1 disclosed the specificity of our own historical development as an imagined 'white nation'. This dissonance with the US was made increasingly apparent in view of the unique narratives of racism, migration and settlement in the UK. In particular, we discovered that Britain's industrial development and the ensuing process of urbanisation had given way to the production of disparate, often entrenched, social class formations. Uncovering this history enabled us to achieve a clearer insight into the 'making' of youthful white, English ethnicities in the present situation.

In Chapters 3 and 4 close attention was given to the methodological issues that arose when investigating young people's white cultural identities. The discussion of subjectivity, positionality and the micro-politics of research drew further attention to the multiple and fragmented status of the identities of the researcher and researched. In contrast to much of the existing methodological literature, I argued for an

understanding of ethnicity as something that was discursively produced in the fieldwork encounter. The production of ethnic identities during research went above and beyond the *a priori* notion of subjectivity that was assumed in even the most sophisticated and sensitive social construction accounts. As such, it was argued that any assessment of 'race of interviewer' effects was especially precarious. Ironically, forms of 'racial matching' seemed an inherently problematic premise upon which to conduct research on social justice or anti-racism. Instead, researchers were encouraged to be self-reflexive about the oscillating manner in which 'sameness' and 'difference' could be articulated in fieldwork encounters. Thus, the rose-tinted opinion of certain researchers who may claim assumed subject positions of 'sameness' based on imaginary mutual interests (e.g. feminists interviewing women) was thoroughly critiqued in favour of a complex and contingent understanding of respondent-generated data as a series of positioned responses.

Here, social context, the subjectivities of the researcher/researched, the types of questions asked and the format for relaying information were all influential in shaping participant responses. Where possible data could be corroborated through triangulation methods (such as the combination of ethnography and history deployed in this study), yet this in itself could not safeguard against 'anomalies' in the research process. Moreover, it was suggested that these 'anomalies' could yet be at the crux of the research. In this regard the findings presented here were refined through triangulation methods, respondent validation and the use of multiple method techniques. Even so, the act of data collection and interpretation remained part of an entirely subjective dialogue that was always implicated in the socially constructed process of doing qualitative research. Substantive issues related to the micro-politics of research were discussed in detail. These included the subject of ethnicity, the role of embodiment, subjectivity, method, methodology, epistemology, self-reflexivity and issues pertaining to the politics of representation.

In order to provide a suitable grounding for the subsequent empirical analysis that was to take place in the following chapters a micro-history of post-war British subcultural studies was undertaken. A careful illustration of the different philosophical approaches to the vexed question of 'youth' was outlined including the adoption of Marxist, feminist, anti-oppressive and postmodernist techniques. The epistemological

bases of these perspectives were brought to light and historically situated in their respective political moments. This encouraged me to further recognise the manner in which the social meaning of whiteness in young peoples' daily lives had been hitherto largely ignored. Indeed, subcultural methods were invaluable in that they offered me a 'frozen glimpse' of what would otherwise have been an ever-elusive white ethnicity. Not least for this reason subcultural methods became a pivotal technique for interpreting the complex and contingent white lives of the youthful ethnic majority. Here, a new definition of subculture was deployed that recognised the contingent nature and dynamism of young people's social collectivities. The preferred term *discursive clusters* was felt to better illustrate the partial and fragmented experience of subcultural 'belonging'. In this respect, the study revealed the inauthentic nature of subcultures: the forms self-presentation deployed by the Pale Warriors was anything but intrinsically white; the Real Geordies were never 'real' in the occupational sense; the Charvers could be seen as an imagined community constructed from figments of urban legend and of folklore; only some members of the B-Boyz and 'wiggers' had taken on the subcultural label as a badge of honour. Accordingly, traditional notions of subcultures as rigid, hermetically-sealed structures were substituted in favour of new cultural repertoires that comprised fluid, discursive clusters of meaning.

Three primary methods of subcultural inquiry were discussed: historical, textual and ethnographic. Each of these approaches provided an additional layer of understanding to the study of youth. However, the research in this thesis was not merely concerned with historiography but with the actual social interactions that occur in young people's life experiences. In comparison with the preponderance of studies derived from statistics, questionnaires, press reports and semiotic methods, ethnography provided for a far richer and arguably more penetrative analysis of ethnicity and racism in the lived cultures of young people. The use of ethnographic data and in-depth life history accounts was a sharp divergence from the disembodied representations of youth so unflinchingly secured in much of the quantitative (and some of the qualitative) analyses. Instead, the vivid responses of young people in this study were in marked contrast to the free-floating, nebulous entities we tend to encounter in many of the standard questionnaire, press and semiotic accounts.

At the same time, my own research has strategically drawn upon historiography, auto/biography, ethnography and textual interpretations of young people's life experiences. The methodological discussion of ethnography and life history demonstrated the value of longitudinal research with young people. The use of an ethnographic methodology encompassed disparate methods including participant observation, direct social interaction, the deployment of individual and focus group interviews as well as video, photography and life-history method. This in-depth analysis allowed for multi-dimensional perspectives on white, youthful subjectivities. Despite these advantages the methodological chapters also drew attention to some of the drawbacks of relying on subcultural ethnographic methods. One of the pit-falls that arose was the almost inevitable pull towards 'spectacular' male subcultures such as that which was witnessed in the representation of the Kempton Dene Skins (Chapter 5). To counteract this tendency I was compelled to set up female single-sex focus groups and cultivate narrative life-history methods as alternative research devices. Even so, the issue of masculinism and its relationship to subculture and ethnography needed to be discussed in detail. Furthermore, a particularly sensitive area concerned the issue of representation. In particular the question of who speaks for whom and whose purpose this serves is an issue that has dogged recent subcultural ethnographies. This remains a valid research question, especially in the wake of the former exploitative urban accounts of working-class life discussed in this thesis which were derived from Victorian and Edwardian social observers (Chapter 1). For these reasons I chose to address the controversial issue of insider/outsider accounts head-on and assess their respective values accordingly. Here, it was argued that there was a tendency to view these discursive locations as polarised, mutually exclusive positions. Moreover, the notion of authenticity - a mirage that many subcultural researchers have been seduced by - ignores the struggle for meaning, the internal contestation and the complicated politic of representation that occurs within subcultures themselves.

## **The Ethnographic Evidence - How do white youth 'do' whiteness?**

At the start of the thesis early representations of the industrial English city and the accompanying middle-class perceptions of urban life as essentially that of a dark, impenetrable existence were found to be prominent. In Chapter 5 I began by considering representations of the rural, the particular relationship this bore to nationhood and the further symbolic meanings transmuted to the countryside and suburbia. In contrast, the rural was seen to be a repository containing mythic attachments to whiteness, Englishness and nationhood. Moreover, an examination of the geography of racist violence disclosed a recent emphasis on outer-city areas as 'new frontiers' holding a greater potential for the predilection of racist violence. The case history of the West Midlands conurbation revealed a disparate picture that exposed close multi-ethnic co-habitation in central districts, counterpoised with stark white enclaves in the outer-ring and a historical legacy of longstanding political racist activities. Post-war re-development has also witnessed the displacement of working-class communities in isolated, outer-city estates. It was in this context of 'white flight', social deprivation and a fierce allegiance to the street-life of the neighbourhood that the first empirical study of Birmingham's Pale Warriors was undertaken.

The opening chapter comprised an ethnographic study of a Skinhead 'gang' on a peripheral white estate in the West Midlands. Drawing upon an established literature on Skinhead style and subculture the research aimed to provide an embodied account of Skinheadism that included the voices and first-hand accounts of the actual participants involved. Evidently, whiteness was not experienced as a norm within the subculture (in the way that it was say, with the Real Geordies) but was laboriously struggled over and repetitively given meaning through a series of stylised enactments: dress-code, hairstyle, the exhibition of racist graffiti, the use of racist language, the deployment of organised and disorganised racist violence. As such, the Skins were said to exude a 'hyper-whiteness' that effectively produced them as Pale Warriors - romantic defenders of an ever retreating, imaginary English working-class culture. Despite a paleface of white hostility the performance of the Skins was always one of inherent contradiction. These ambiguities were apparent in Skinhead style past and present, the internal friendship group that included two 'mixed-heritage' males and the

ambivalent attitudes towards race and sexuality more generally<sup>182</sup>. Subsequently, 'doing' whiteness was not a natural activity, but a performative style sustained through corporeal actions and choreographed displays. However, for the Skinhead subculture concerned, the most obvious route to 'do' whiteness was through a mutual celebration of whiteness, Englishness and racism.

In Chapters 6-9 the geographical emphasis shifted from the English Midlands to the Tyneside conurbation in the Northeast of England. A historiography of the locality was submitted in order to map the patterns of migration and settlement to the region. This represented an attempt to include the hidden ethnicities resting within the locality. Despite the overbearing whiteness of the area there was conclusive evidence to suggest that the 'white highlands' perception of the district was a social construct that occluded the wide-ranging experiences of the diverse migrant communities residing therein. Although the region prioritised locality above nationhood this in itself had not deterred racist activity. Rather, it had led to the emergence of a form of 'parochial patriotism' in which investments in national identity were sublimated into a local, insular dislike for outsiders, 'foreigners' or anyone else who attempted to re-fashion white, male, industrial identifications with 'Geordie'.

At the same time, I found that locality was also an invaluable teaching resource that could reflect the radical tradition within working-class culture. This counter-history disclosed a unique labour heritage that included anti-fascist alliances and much evidence of a communal, collective crusade for social justice. At a pedagogic level these local points of resistance allowed for a positive engagement with the white, English ethnicities of young people. In contradiction to the common response made by certain teachers that implied white students lacked culture, the strong working-class *milieu* of 'Geordie' youth suggested otherwise. In particular, the ethnographic research discovered that most students accepted the egalitarian principles of anti-racism in theory, yet in practice many perceived that the existing legislation was 'unfair' to the needs of the ethnic majority. Consequently, a number of white grievances were suppressed but at times this resentment could be unleashed in the

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<sup>182</sup> For example we may recall the ambiguous attitudes held towards Tina Turner and the screen production *The Buddah of Suburbia*. Alternatively we may further consider the attitudes towards interracial dating.



form of a 'white backlash'. Evidence of this backlash could be seen in the plethora of racist jokes, name-calling, the sense of white injustice and the unyielding parental and student belief that anti-racism was essentially a technique for the surveillance of white cultural identity. In this respect, racism and anti-racism were complex, competing discourses in the lives of young people. At a policy level this implied that more thought-out, less proscriptive initiatives are required which are geographically sensitive to the context and culture of the region.

In keeping with the tradition of critical ethnography the research sought to challenge a widespread misconception that anti-racism was 'anti-white' and necessarily favoured black youth at the expense of their white-Anglo counterparts. It became clear that if white students were to feel able to contribute to anti-racism they had to have a subjective investment in speaking out against racism. A means by which this could be achieved was by drawing upon the rich, radical tradition of the local community. Advocating more inclusive notions of 'Geordie' became possible when students were encouraged to partake in narratives of ethnic self-reflexivity. Here, the concept of a monolithic white, English ethnicity became fragmented through the process of self-narration and use of familial auto/biographies. Discussions related to social class, local identity and the multiple, mutable nature of white ethnicity enabled new subject positions to be created within the identity 'white'. This was an attempt to move beyond the Pale Warrior stance witnessed in Kempton Dene, whereupon the stereotype of the 'Nazi Skinhead' seemed a most fitting resolution to the failure of practitioners to engage with the unspoken subject of white, English ethnicity.

The potential for multiple subject positions within white ethnicity became the focus of the Tyneside subcultural studies concerning Real Geordies, Charver Kids and then later, a stratum of white renegades that included wannabes, B-Boyz and 'race traitors' (Chapter 8, 9). That such markedly divergent forms of white ethnicity were detected in the ostensibly white locale of the Northeast of England suggested manifold possibilities for the reconstitution of whiteness. Each of the subcultures could be interpreted as discursive clusters in which the meaning of whiteness was being differently articulated. In this regard, the subcultures were relationally situated and came to represent the creative and negotiated responses of young people to the silent issue of whiteness. Moreover, these embodied subcultural experiences provided new

spaces of 'inbetweenness' within the polarised locations that marked white subjectivity as either inherently 'racist' or 'anti-racist'. In particular these negotiated responses were inflected by spatial variables and social class differences. The subcultural portraits offered conclusive evidence that the 'doing' of whiteness is a practice, furthermore, this activity could be enacted in multiple and often contrasting ways. The mutability of white ethnicity in young people's lives and the fluidity with which whiteness can be fashioned and re-fashioned has implications for social change. It suggests that white youth do experiment with their ethnicities and are simultaneously engaged in the 'making' of cultural identities. Moreover, if the making of white, youthful ethnicities can take place outside the narrow confines of racism and nationalism there remains potential for the learning of new cultural heritages liberated from the burden of an austere English imperial whiteness.

The subcultural analysis of young people's ethnicities uncovered different expressions related to the 'doing' of whiteness. Thus, the Real Geordies descended from a conservative fraction of the skilled working class and were carriers of a normative white-Anglo ethnicity. This identification with a former labour aristocracy gave rise to unspoken investments in the culture of manual work that were in turn translated into localised day-to-day practices. As a consequence, the subculture attempted to invoke many of the imaginary masculine values of the workplace into the out-of-work situation. Here, the collective rituals of football, drinking and having a 'laff' were endowed with a symbolic significance that were obliquely related to the local political economy. Essentially, the Real Geordies were men out of time, strangely nostalgic for a period they had never experienced. And yet, a closer inspection of their peer-group activities revealed that whilst there were a number of continuities with the recent historical past, one could also trace clear pointers of difference in these new practices of inheritance.

It was discovered that the concept of the 'Real Geordie' as an identity forged in the world of manual labour could no longer survive under the present local economic conditions. However, this did not mean these industrial identifications had altogether disappeared. Rather, there was a shift in emphasis away from the meaning of the 'Real Geordie' as an identity constructed around the symbolic markers of production towards the notion of a localised subjectivity now constituted around patterns of

consumption. Moreover, these rituals of consumption - football, drinking, 'going out' - offered some of the regulatory security found in work-based routines. The critical significance of consumption and the role it plays in consolidating youthful identities was apparent in the antipathy expressed by the Real Geordies to other subcultures. In particular, the Charver Kids and the B-Boyz were regarded as other-than-white, an assessment that was based, in part, on patterns of consumption: where they shopped, how they dressed, their musical tastes and sporting preferences.

In this respect, Charver Kids represented Tyneside's contemporary urban underclass. They came from families where long-term unemployment and criminal activity was the alleged norm. Their socio-economic situation as lower working-class youth could be subtly contrasted with the upwardly-mobile, skilled backgrounds of the Real Geordies who at all times believed themselves to be a 'cut above' denigrated Charver families. In the final analysis Charvers were the not-quite-white of the region on account of urban living, a lower working-class status and a subcultural style that was widely recognised for its associations with 'white trash'. This intra-discursive ethnic discourse revisited the longstanding split between a 'rough' and 'respectable' English working-class culture previously discussed in Chapter 1. The 'moral panic' generated by commentators upon Charvers portrayed them as social degenerates, urban primitives who carried all the symbolic hatred ascribed to immigrants by way of the interconnected discourses of infestation, crime, violence and over-breeding. This discursive representation drew upon an existing repertoire of racist stereotypes to demonstrate the interconnectedness of issues of race, place and class.

However, the Charver Kids were not the only subculture removed from whiteness. A configuration of 'race traitors', B-Boyz and 'wannabes' had managed to establish themselves as 'white escapees' on account of their contingent and contradictory attachment to black culture (Chapter 9). These ethnic mavericks were regarded as contemporary 'White Negroes': white youth who had relinquished whiteness for the fetishistic allure of the style of the black Other. The social signifiers of this transgression were attributed to be the desire for basketball, hip-hop culture, dance music, baggy clothes, black hairstyles and a variety of linguistic and corporeal postures. On occasion certain members were found to be particularly selective about the forms of black 'cool' they wished to aspire to; this fantasy was usually concerned

with superficial aspects of blackness often premised on the imaginary urban, African-American experience. At the same time, some youth had achieved a deeper, more intimate relationship with blackness that extended well beyond the shallow forms of longing detected in the desires of other white youth. In these white circles a commitment to black friendships, anti-racist perspectives and the authenticity of black music was seriously valued. Furthermore, the experience of racist oppression could be carefully unravelled through the subjective, youthful experience of social class subordination. Such experiential interpretations of difference may provide more meaningful points of alliance in young people's coming-of-age.

At a relational level the subcultural studies, then, comprised Pale Warriors, Real Geordies, Charver Kids and Wannabes. Each of these discursive clusters illustrated the spectrum of subtle gradations and nuances that exist within the social category 'white'. If the Pale Warriors portrayed an exaggerated depiction of whiteness at one end of the scale, then the Wannabes symbolised a reversal of these codes at the other. However, each of these discursive youth clusters shared an understanding of the meaning of whiteness and cultural identity in the lives of young people that could be utilised within post-colonial Britain. Close investigation further revealed that each group could draw upon black culture in divergent ways to serve different purposes within the arena of popular youth culture. In this respect the young people in this study could be seen to be living *Ivory Lives*: lives which on the surface may have appeared to be quintessentially white but in reality were found to have an 'off-white' legacy. Moreover, in the same way that ivory has an African/Indian heritage that is at times related to colonial exploitation many of the white youth in this study were explicitly or implicitly influenced by black cultural dialogues. Here we may consider the hairstyles, dress codes and cannabis experience of the Skins; the language, body postures and musical preferences of the maverick B-Boyz and Girlz; the urban street styles, argot and attitude of the Charvers as examples of this off-white ivory status. In the same way, the metaphors of whiteness evoked by the Real Geordies (salt of the earth, backbone of the nation) could never quite live up to their imaginary identifications in view of the current situation regarding local industry which now appealed to foreign investors and the global market economy. Ultimately, white youth were found to sculpt a myriad of precious Ivory Lives shaped in an intricately different way from one another. In so doing, some tried to carve a new ethnic

heritage whilst others preferred to effect a monolithic style of whiteness that was inevitably underscored by the very materials deployed in exhibiting such a pristine white existence.

The final chapter in the thesis drew upon narrative and auto/biographical methods to disclose the meaning of whiteness through ten multi-ethnic life histories. Life-history method enabled us to view how cultural identities were produced through narrative. Moreover, the technique exposed the way in which ethnicities were discursively fashioned and given meaning through episodic 'moments of being' (Stanley, 1992). The narratives were written or spoken, being derived from respondents who either felt estranged from whiteness or were implicated in a complex and contingent negotiation with white ideals. Noticeably, the storytellers displayed a remarkable clarity in naming and deconstructing the white norm within their respective life-history experiences. As such, the chapter considered the negotiation of whiteness to convincingly reveal how whiteness could be 'made' and 'unmade' in the lives of those individuals who lived in subordinated existence to white norms. In the wider scheme of the thesis these stories functioned as counter-narratives, self-reflexive tales about the 'doing' and 'undoing' of white oppression. Furthermore, the life histories demonstrated that whiteness was an activity, a performative practice that bore no natural relation to actual skin colour. Thus, it was possible for ethnic minority young people to make conditional identifications with whiteness as the previous Skinhead accounts of Calvin and Leonard have already come to testify. At the same time, certain whites could renounce the privilege of whiteness through a critical appraisal of their cultural identities. This position may have been acquired through an experimental foray with the fantasy of black style that had later led to a critical interrogation of white Anglo-ethnicity. Nevertheless, as with the subcultural analysis the life-history narratives demonstrate that when it comes to whiteness that which appears accomplished and done, can yet be undone.

We may conclude how like the many translucent outer-skins that come to make up an onion, the peeling away of white ethnicity did not in the end reveal a hidden, 'inner truth' resting within. Rather, we arrived at the hollow centre of whiteness, a destination that has served only to expose the absent presence of whiteness.

## **Future Perspectives**

This thesis was concerned with the meaning of whiteness in young people's social lives. In view of the burgeoning research on the ethnicities of minority youth the investigation inquired, how do white youth 'do' whiteness? The study made lucid the relationship between my work on white, English ethnicities and the existing research on whiteness, youth subculture and ethnicity (Chapter 2, 4). The scope, purposes and underlying rationale for a project on whiteness were clarified at the outset (Chapters 1, 3, 4). Furthermore, the suitability of using historical, subcultural and ethnographic methods of investigation were discussed in detail (Chapter 4). Here, attention was also given to the plausibility of claims in relation to the validity of interpretations offered. Throughout, the study emphasised the practical and theoretical implications of the findings for pedagogic practice and future anti-racist initiatives.

While this thesis has achieved a rare and sensitive portrait of white ethnicity, in retrospect parts of the research could have been conducted differently. The absence of any social history of whiteness in the English context meant that it was necessary to document the story of how the British became white. This narrative was written after the empirical research was completed, indeed, it had been instigated by the ethnography of Charver Kids. Looking back, the historiography itself could have formed the main bulk of the research, though of course the thesis would have looked very different had this task been undertaken. Given the constraints upon time and the practical realities of carrying out ethnography, historiography may have been a more realistic method of research. If this line of argument had been pursued the use of oral histories from previous generations could have been of value, thereby shifting the emphasis from youth. Overall, while a greater reliance on historical methods may not have produced work of a higher quality, I have little doubt it would have made for a tighter and more polished study. In contrast, ethnography appeared a 'messy' and at times over-ambitious method by which to produce a carefully honed argument. Nevertheless, the benefits were that the method allowed me to capture the complex and contingent meaning of white cultural identity in the present moment and gain an insight into the 'lived' experience of whiteness.

Furthermore, despite my familiarity with subcultural theories I realise now that I had under-estimated the extent to which male accounts would dominate proceedings. While this was in part remedied through the use of other research methods it may have been beneficial to have also focused upon female subcultures and 'girl gangs' to counter-balance this tendency. Moreover, basing the research in the Northeast of England, an area widely recognised to have less pronounced subcultural styles (Coffield *et.al*,1986), made the study increasingly difficult to conduct. Researching whiteness in multi-ethnic localities where a flamboyant display of diverse ethnic youth styles can be found would have represented a more straightforward task than it did in the mainly-white zones of the West Midlands peripheries and the Tyneside conurbation. Alternatively, the ethnography could have taken place in two English cities: a multi-ethnic district and a mainly-white locale<sup>183</sup>. By comparing and contrasting these places a more balanced geographical analysis could have been secured.

At present there remains scope for future development in the area of white Anglo-ethnicity. At the time of writing a most recent article has begun to explore the cultural identities of white hip-hop youth in Northeast England (Bennett, 1999)<sup>184</sup>. This indicates that the longstanding trend of ignoring the issue of ethnicity in majority-white areas is gradually being arrested. Another means by which research into whiteness could be developed is by building upon international studies. International perspectives on whiteness may yet hasten the departure from US-led standpoints to yield further insight into global understandings of youth and ethnicity. As it stands, a series of uncertainties still abound when it comes to the direction and purpose of future studies on whiteness. Foremost amongst this is the fear of seeing older anti-racist gains wiped out in the celebratory knowledge that white people also have an ethnic identity, even if it is one marked by privilege. Certainly, we have witnessed enough white pride over the years. Instead, by advocating a critical engagement with whiteness I hope to extend the post-colonial debate beyond the present but limited

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<sup>183</sup> In hindsight I could also envisage the research centring upon two distinct spatial zones, the inner city and an outlying rural district.

<sup>184</sup> Due to the late emergence of this work I have been unable to discuss this study in any great detail. However, the research corroborates some of the findings found in Chapter 8 concerning the emergent 'wannabe' culture within the district.

contours of ethnicity as the anthropology of the Other. Placing white Anglo-identity as the subject of the ethnographic research gaze was not only a way of making the familiar strange but also a means of dislodging whiteness from its status as the unquestioned norm. The political strands of this argument should not be lost sight of. For this author, writing in the present English post-imperial moment, the words of the black scholar WEB DuBois first uttered some eighty years earlier continue to retain a burning significance. '[N]one there are that intrigue me more', declares DuBois, 'than the Souls of White Folk'. It is envisaged that future research will at last render whiteness beyond such intrigue. In doing so, the historical and empirical ambiguity of a youthful ivory existence should not go overlooked.



# Appendix

## Data code

[...] edited break in text  
... participant pause in text  
*[italics]* description of action

## Interviews

### A. The Kempton Dene estate, West Midlands

*'Pale Warriors': Skinhead males (aged 13-16 years)*

Calvin (mixed-heritage: black father, white mother)  
Daniel (white)  
Darren (white)  
Leonard (mixed-heritage: black father, white mother)  
Mark (white)  
Paul (white)  
Robbie (white)

*Other interviewees referred to*

Adam (white Kempton Dene Skinhead, 21 years)  
Aisha (Black British Ridgeway Comprehensive student, 15 years)  
Linda (white Ridgeway Comprehensive student, 15 years)  
Nicola (white Ridgeway Comprehensive student, 15 years)  
Roger (white Ridgeway Comprehensive student, 15 years)  
Sidhou, Mr (Sikh Asian shop-keeper)  
Whitlock, P.C. (Kempton Dene police officer)

### B. The Tyneside conurbation, Northeast England

*Emblevale School (9-10 years)*

Alan  
Alistair  
Andrew  
Brett  
Danielle  
Fern  
Jane  
Kirsty

*Emblevale School (11-12 years)*

James  
Lucy  
Michelle  
Nicola/Nicky  
Sam  
Sara

*Snowhill Comprehensive, male familial labouring background in brackets (16-17 years)*

Bill (sheet-metal worker)  
Cambo (skilled construction)  
Carl (skilled construction)  
Dave (skilled construction)  
Duane (car mechanic)  
Ema (armed forces)  
Fat Mal (factory foreman)  
Filo (central-heating fitter)  
Helena (care-taker)  
Jason (small business)  
John (site manager)  
Jolene (bailiff)  
Jono (cab driver)  
Lucy (small business)  
Paul (public sector)  
Shaun (publican)  
Spencer (skilled construction)  
Steve (electrician)  
Suzanne (skilled labour)

**C. Life-history respondents, ethnic heritage in brackets**

Adrian Hunter (white, English)  
Amerjit Singh (British Asian)  
Helena Foster (white, Norwegian-English)  
Meena Kumar (British Asian)  
Naomi Milton (Black British)  
Nathan Curtis (Anglo-Asian)  
Sabina Choudhury (Anglo-Irish-Asian)  
Satpal Verdi (British Asian)  
Sunil Sharma (British Asian)  
Tina Hussain (British Arabic)

## School-based data

### *Emblevale School*

In-take range: 9-13 years

Total number of students: 405

Number of students requiring special educational needs (SEN): 118

Percentage of students for whom English is an additional language: 11%

Percentage of students receiving free school meals: 24%

### *Snowhill Comprehensive*

In-take range: 11-18 years

Total number of students: 1,936

White ethnic majority: 1,869

### *Snowhill Comprehensive XI Form*

Total number of students: 270 of which 15 were identified as ethnic minority

255 classified as white, UK citizens

6 classified as Indian

5 classified as Chinese

2 classified as Pakistani

2 classified as 'Other minority'

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